The Storyteller

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The Storyteller

by gzdacz

Summary

Hannibal has little choice: to eliminate the threat he presents, he must stand by and let illness consume Will Graham. But the brighter Will burns, the more the delusions of his inflamed brain begin to spill onto Hannibal's world, until the boundaries between the real and imagined become faint - and something Other slips through.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The Woods

Chapter Notes

This story has been long in the making and I am beyond excited to finally share it with you. I aim to publish the first three chapters by the end of this week to get things going; after that, we're probably looking at weekly updates. Much of the story is ready-ish now, but chapter count is approximate.

A few assorted notes about content:
We begin sometime in season one. I'm not married to the show timeline here, but I would place it sometime before *Fromage* (before Tobias Budge, Abigail digging up Nick Boyle's body, Georgia Madchen etc.)

There is some sexual content in later chapters, but it's fairly mild, which is why I've kept this at an M rating.

Finally, Will's encephalitis plays an important role in this story, but it is still primarily a plot device. Please do not treat this fic as any sort of useful resource on the realities of this condition.

The Storyteller

PART ONE.

Chapter One: The Woods.

‘There’s a thing in the woods.’

‘A thing in the woods. What is this thing in the woods?’

Will grins leisurely, a sharp glimpse of clarity cut into him like glass. ‘If I knew what the thing was, Doctor Lecter,’ he says, ‘it wouldn’t be a *thing* anymore, would it?’

Hannibal hums. ‘You name the unnamed by vocation. You give voice to the things the rest of society shroud in silence.’

And he does it well. A patient cancelled late last week, so Hannibal made use of the spare hour to sit in on one of Will’s lectures. It did not mention the Chesapeake Ripper, which was disappointing. He considered telling Will as much when he stopped by his desk on the way out, then thought better of it, then Will said it for him.

‘No psychoanalyst’s celebrities today—just me. Sorry to disappoint.’

He was smiling. Hannibal told him it was an equal pleasure to see him apply his intellect to a less illustrious case, and that he was not disappointed.

‘You need to work on your white lies,’ Will said. Then he walked Hannibal out, navigating the maze of the Bureau’s corridors so aptly he might have been the monster at its heart.

Where crime scenes make Will go cold and deliciously threatening, and therapy makes him a fevered thing thrashing in its bindings, the lectures make Will shine. Every word is tailored exactly to best explain the workings of his mind to the common man; his gestures are precise, his conclusions final. He keeps a moat between himself and his eager audience, a pit filled with a deep dark no one dares cross, but there’s a unique joy in watching him from afar: he is no longer man but spectacle, an actor on a stage, a being separate, untouchable.

Rain thuds against the shingles of the roof. Hannibal normally abstains from kindling the fire until late autumn, but October is coming to a close in torrents and mists, and shortly before Will’s arrival he thought to himself: why should his office stand a cold contrast to Will’s burning when it could act a mirror instead? Outside, rains beat against windows and breaths hang white in the air; in their sanctum, Will’s fever bleeds into the cracks in the floor, it lights fires and lamps and eyes.

The crackle of the fire is now the grandest sound of the room. The rain is slowing into a soft patter. There’s an ease here that Will is not privy to: his muscles lie tense over bone, his fingers curl into claws on the armrests. But Hannibal feels at peace.

‘What is the thing in the woods, Will?’

‘That would be a, uh, fascinating exercise, if this was a metaphor.’ Another flash of teeth: too white against the flush of his face. ‘I can’t walk my dogs anymore because I’m convinced something in my backyard is going to eat me—I think your paper on active imagination can wait.’

Despite himself, Hannibal smiles. ‘You’ve been to see Abigail.’

He knows Will has not, but it would be impolite to say it.

Will looks at him squarely, like he knows Hannibal knows. ‘No,’ he drawls. ‘I haven’t been to *see* her. We talked on the phone. Hoping to recruit an apprentice, Doctor?’

‘She expressed an interest. It isn’t unusual for patients to become curious about the art of psychoanalysis as they undergo therapy themselves.’

‘Art is the right word for it. You’re making her read *Jung*.’

‘I lent her a selection of classic works,’ he says. ‘But yes.’

Will shakes his head. It draws Hannibal’s eyes to his neck, where the tendons are strained from tension: the pronounced jugular thrums as though he’d been running.

‘I guess it’s interesting enough for a novice—even if it’s bullshit. Just please keep Jung out of this.’

He gestures between them, to the thing stretched there he doesn’t want to name.

‘Many modern practitioners renounce Jung’s ideas because they’d like to believe psychoanalysis a science,’ Hannibal says idly. He doesn’t much care, but he enjoys the argument for its own sake. ‘Others would say it is first and foremost art.’

‘It shouldn’t be,’ Will snaps. He, unlike Hannibal, does care, which is of course the source of the pleasure.

‘That implies it is nevertheless.’

‘It’s not when I do it.’

‘No?’

‘No. I look at evidence and I interpret evidence. Postulate follows from postulate. There’s no *art* to it.’

‘That is not how it appears to others, Will.’

‘I don’t care how it appears to others.’

Hannibal falls silent for a moment to indicate acknowledgement. Then,

‘Would you like to know how it appears to me?’

Will’s laugh spills acid. He throws Hannibal a glance: he doesn’t want to know but he wants to know. There are so many things Hannibal could lead him to want; so many places he might take him.

The thought is a stab at the peace he feels. It’s like glancing at the watch as you’re getting ready to leave and realizing it is later than you thought—if you don’t hurry, the train will disappear down the tracks before you ever reach the station.

‘Poetry,’ Hannibal says gently.

‘You’re, uh—you’re trying to find bigger meaning in it. I get it. If it’s poetry, then the ugly parts aren’t ugly, they’re metaphor. That’s pretty, but it’s not accurate.’

‘Or perhaps you’re seeking to emotionally distance yourself from what you do by refusing to see the beauty it holds.’

Will’s teeth show again. He’s caught. ‘Maybe,’ he murmurs, and strains to push the smile back in.

Above them, the rain dwindles, then dies.

Hannibal remembers that they are meant to be doing therapy.

‘You said the thing in the forest wants to eat you,’ he picks up.

Will doesn’t immediately answer, which is to be expected. But then the silence stretches, and stretches some more, and then Hannibal sees it: the glaze of his eyes, the part of his lips. Idly, he is plucking at the upholstery where a thread has come loose.

He could not answer Hannibal if he heard him, and he doesn’t hear him.

It is not uncommon for encephalitis to produce epileptic episodes, but this is Will’s second this week: the illness is progressing faster than Hannibal expected.

He leans back in his chair. He watches.

He understands that eventually, this will pass. Jung, a thinker of little significance to him today but of great allure in Hannibal’s youth, was the one to say it: we see reflections of ourselves in those we fall for, of parts and facets buried and unrealized, and we climb back up into disaffection once they have been pried out. The shimmer of awe he feels watching Will tether on the edges of reality will wane like it inevitably does, and Will himself will become a closed chapter in Hannibal’s life. A music chamber in his mind palace will bloom from it, he thinks, or maybe a long couloir he will traverse over and back when he wishes it.

The only risk Hannibal anticipates is just that: missing the train. Will’s light might go off before he has had the time to drink him dry.

Will shifts in his seat, eyes blinking confusedly. Hannibal gives him another moment, then repeats, as though nothing odd had happened at all, ‘You said the thing in the forest wants to eat you.’

‘I don’t—’

He can sense something is wrong. His hands will be tingling, his mouth will taste sour. He looks to the ceiling, bracing himself for a thing Hannibal cannot guess.

Then, he breathes and says in a voice just on the verge of breaking, ‘I think there’s something wrong with me.’

Hannibal swallows the smile. Will catches it anyway.

‘I mean *physically wrong*, Doctor. Besides the usual. I—you want it to be trauma, or what, anxiety, or—the drop just before psychosis, but that’s not what it feels like.’

Hannibal hesitates.

And there it is: all it takes is that moment’s lapse in quick judgement and Will’s face shutters —his eyes pinch—suspicion cuts clear through.

Hannibal can near hear the gears: they turn and whistle as Will takes in his expression, his growing silence, the pull of his shoulders. He gathers evidence from Hannibal’s physical

form and is building upon it a hypothesis: that Hannibal doesn't want Will to search for an underlying cause—that Hannibal already *knows* what the underlying cause is—that there's something Hannibal isn't telling him.

The best he can describe the feeling that follows is this: a fullness, like the sort one feels from a good meal.

Will is never going to guess exactly what's wrong, of course: not in his state of mind and not with Hannibal here to placate him. But Hannibal forgets at times that within his Will, the Will made sweetly pliable and dulled with illness, within him there is another Will.

This other Will is not a thing to drink from. He is a threat, and one so potent that Hannibal cannot abide it.

The fullness, then, is the power that surges within him with each thing he doesn't tell Will: the power over this Other in him.

'I have a colleague in the neurology department at the Noble Hills Care Center,' he says. 'Let me make a call.'

He has successfully thrown Will clear off track. 'Wait—now?' he stutters.

'If you ask my opinion, your symptoms point toward the psychological, not the physical. But mine is not the only opinion that matters, and lines blur. You know your body, Will. If it's trying to tell you something, that's a lead. Let's pursue it, even if only to eliminate it. *Now*.'

Hannibal adores a medical emergency. It was one of the things that kept him in the ER for so long: the switch as the easy amble of regular life became a sprint, as things that were unimportant or nonurgent a second ago turned inevitable.

Now, the leisurely session becomes a rush of phone-calls: to Donald, to the Noble Hills reception, to the radiologist on call, to Donald again. He doesn't tell Will to put on his coat, he merely nods at him and he is up, hands shaking minutely as he gathers his things. The air is thick with anticipation.

They drive to Hannibal's house first. Will waits in the car as Hannibal rushes inside to find him soft slippers, a robe, a pair of pyjamas. On the way out, his eyes snag on the harpsichord, peeking through the open door to the study: a trill teases at his neck, the echo of a note. He will write tonight: fingers sat on the fat keys, Will's tragedy swelling under each tip.

Will accepts the hospital bag with no words, only a jerky nod of thanks. The bag is in case Hannibal needs to leave him there: this is a thing they both know but will not say.

The air smells of rain. It's the sort of thing Hannibal might comment on to break the tension, but he doesn't want to break the tension.

Donald meets them in the lobby. He is poor at hiding his eagerness. He can hardly be faulted: Hannibal has never asked for a favour like this before, and Donald likes his drama. At John Hopkins, he used to pick up old paperbacks in antique shops, with swooning street girls and

mysterious men in black drawn on the cover, and lay them out in his lap as he pretended to pay attention during guest lectures. Hannibal has great fondness for the memory and revisits it often: the oppressiveness of the lecture hall, the residents falling asleep over their notes, the blistering arrogance of the speaker and Donald's preposterous novels.

Will is made to sign three different consent forms. His hand is so unsteady that the letters of his name fall off the dotted line. Hannibal fetches another copy and fills it out for him, patient as Will struggles to remember his social security number—blanking, going back to correct himself, breathing—starting over.

They are led then to an empty room where Will is asked to change into a hospital gown. He spends a while trying to convince the nurse he doesn't need to, but she won't relent, and Hannibal is too keen to see him uncomfortable to come to his aid. As he waits outside, he goes through Will's consent forms—Will has read them, but he wouldn't have understood them. He is waiting to be told he has cancer; any reading he does will be purely performative.

His hair is mussed to madness when he comes out of the room. In Hannibal's experience, the pale gown never quite fits anyone, but it looks right on *him*: stripped of his sweaters and heavy frames, Will finally looks like the ill man he is. With the way he's avoiding Hannibal's eye, it seems he knows it.

'Do the slippers fit?' Hannibal asks lightly as they make their way to the exam room. He bought them last year and found soon they were just a little tight. A good thing in the end: paired with the cheap hospital gown and Will's pale legs, they look like a mockery in burgundy, and they make Will glare.

'I will step into a puddle of body fluids,' he warns. 'Goddamn sheepskin in a hospital.'

Warmth flushes in Hannibal, fast and full. He has to make himself look away.

He stays until Will has been instructed on the procedure, and has scrolled through the available music, and slid into the MRI machine, and settled. Then, he finds Donald's office, door left ajar: he is waiting.

'What are you going to tell me, Hannibal?' he asks, eyes twinkling.

For a beat, Hannibal lets him hang on the anticipation.

Then he says, 'I believe Will suffers from encephalitis. The symptoms match, and there is a scent to him that I find—unmistakeable.'

Donald angles his head to the side. 'Am I going to find encephalitis? Or is that what you want me to find?'

'I hope you don't find anything at all.'

He has a fine mind, quick enough to catch up, and no trouble at all with dubious morality when he has been made curious. Hannibal used to quite enjoy that.

But even if Donald Sutcliffe is curious, Hannibal is no longer curious about *him,* and he feels impatience rising. There is much to be said for occasionally revisiting the closed chapters of one's past, a nostalgic pleasure that can lend itself to fresh insight—but it holds little draw when he has such a compelling present, waiting for him a few doors down the corridor.

And so, Hannibal is disinclined to give Donald the time he needs to voice his own conclusions. 'It is an unlikely opportunity,' he elaborates, 'to study a unique mind under a unique illness.'

'It is,' Donald agrees. 'But that illness happens to also be debilitating and deadly.'

'I do not wish death on Will,' Hannibal says, even though death is, as he sees it, a likely conclusion. 'What I need is more time.'

When the scans arrive, when Will has dressed again, when he has tucked Hannibal's slippers back into the hospital bag and zipped it shut, Donald invites them both back to his office and tells Will nothing is wrong, and Hannibal feels an outrage in him that he saves to revel in later.

'I would speculate schizophrenia.' Donald is still talking. 'But Doctor Lecter tells me you have no family history. In any case, your brain looks fine—I'm hardly going to tell you to go find yourself a psychiatrist since I can see you already have the best of the best watching out for you.'

Will rests his head in his hands for a moment, breathing. Then, he laughs.

'Didn't think I'd ever wish for a tumour,' he tells Hannibal.

Will leaves his coat and bag with Hannibal at reception and goes to use the facilities, though whether out of real need or only a wanting to hide his face, Hannibal isn't sure. The lobby is a buzz of nurses and patients, eyes urgent and ready; though his ER days are long gone, it doesn't take much imagination to feel like he is one of them again.

Will he come here with Will again, he wonders? It would be quite the thing, but likely too risky. In any case, Will is sure to vehemently argue against hospitals after today's embarrassment: Hannibal wasn't planning that far, but though unintended, it's a useful consequence.

'Hannibal.'

Donald is there, tugging at the nametag loose at his pocket. Hannibal has no desire to speak with him more, but like it or not they are now co-conspirators. He smiles indulgently.

'Heading home?'

'Once I've driven Will back, yes.'

Donald nods. There is something he wants to say.

'Listen—' he hesitates. 'Listen, are you sure about this?'

Hannibal feels the world pivot, then, on this moment: on the silence in which he decides. He can almost see the lives ahead of him that he will never live.

It is intoxicating.

‘Yes,’ he says, and the possible futures go off one-by-one, like lights in a house getting ready for sleep.

It is late by the time they pull up in front of Will’s farmhouse. Trees lean bodily into the porch, bare with blooming winter; they look like the claws of a spectre, or the hanks of a witch’s hair. Behind the house, the forest looms even more menacing: Hannibal can well imagine that a thing *could* live there, keen on its fill of Will’s dwindling life-force.

‘The thing in the forest,’ he remembers as the final rumble of the engine wanes away. ‘You said it wants to eat you.’

Will groans. ‘I don’t know what it wants. When I know it’s not real, I don’t understand it, and when I do understand it, I’m not myself enough to make judgments on intent. But it feels like it wants something, badly. I don’t know. Whatever it wants, it just feels—*inevitable.*’

Hannibal’s fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

‘Anyway—you want a coffee or something before you drive back?’

‘Thank you, Will. I will leave you to get some rest.’

A snort. ‘Yeah, I’m real good at that. Sorry for making you drive out all this way.’

‘You have no need to be.’

‘Hm.’

Will opens the door and goes. The air from outside carries a sharp chill, bright with the promise of snow. It’s not even November yet—it seems they are in for a long winter. The thought sits uncomfortably in Hannibal’s chest.

Will doesn’t look back until he is in the doorway, dogs milling about him. Once there, he glances over his shoulder, and lifts an eyebrow as if to say, *what are you still doing here?*

Hannibal isn’t sure.

The drive is draining, but when he’s finally home, he can’t bring himself to sleep. He lies awake, thinking of the monster in the forest—not Will’s monster but Hannibal’s monster, the monster he’d feared as a child. The forest loomed menacing behind the orphanage, too; he isn’t certain now how long he’d spent there, but he remembers only the one winter, and it was then that the other children told stories of a monster in the forest, and then that Hannibal lay awake in the night, certain that he would be baited into the deep trees and snatched. He was the perfect victim, then, and knew it: malnourished, mute, unable to scream.

It never happened, of course—but on those nights, it *did* feel inevitable.

Around three, he admits defeat and goes downstairs to sit at the harpsichord. He promised himself he would begin work on a composition for Will, but whenever he presses a key, the sound falls flat. He's had a few ideas, snippets of melody that felt like Will when he hummed them, but whichever he tries now, it rings hollow. There is no through-line, he realizes: no larger picture of what the whole of it would sound like, where it would go.

It isn't so much a surprise. After all, he has known Will only a few months—it's hardly enough time to unravel the complexities of any man, let alone Will Graham.

If he could only buy more time—

But how? The only way Hannibal can manage the threat inherent in Will is through subjugation; the only way he can subjugate is with the help of this fortuitous illness. He cannot carve the threat out of Will, nor decide brain matter wheat or chaff to preserve one and discard the other.

Perhaps it is for the best. Short acquaintances are often the headiest.

In any case, the chapter hasn't yet closed. To write a melody that would embody Will, Hannibal first needs to have read the final sentence and turned the page; he has to know how it ends.

A little longer, and he will know how they end.

The Hunter

Chapter Summary

As Will deteriorates, Hannibal pays three visits: to Will, to Abigail, and to his past.

Chapter Notes

A heads-up: there is a brief allusion to past child sexual abuse in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two: The Hunter.

He has a free morning on Friday. Franklyn calls him at the last moment to try and book an emergency session, but after a brief conversation it becomes apparent he has no emergency. There's been a measles outbreak at his office and he was told to stay home, so now he doesn't know what to do with himself and has allowed his thoughts to run away with him. Hannibal confirms that Franklyn has been vaccinated, assures him he is not going to die, and tells him to go find a comedy to watch. He is not going to relinquish his free morning only to have Franklyn spread measles all over his office.

He drives to the Bureau instead. Will is teaching a class at quarter past nine and Hannibal hopes to surprise him. The last time he came in to listen, he'd asked for his blessing in advance, selling a lie about being in the neighbourhood in any case—he doesn't believe there is much neighbourhood to Quantico except *the forest*, so if pressed to elaborate he was fully prepared to tell another involved lie about a mushroom picking excursion, which Will would not have believed but stood a chance at least of making him laugh—but Will didn't express a single sliver of doubt. Hannibal says and Will accepts: this is how it happens these days.

Hannibal likes to think Will trusts him. He holds an entirely concurrent belief that at this moment Will trusts anyone and everyone more than he trusts himself.

But this Friday, it will be a surprise. Hannibal cannot decide whether it will be welcome or a source of discomfort; in either case, it's always a pleasure to watch Will thrust into a context he didn't think to prepare for. He settles himself in the front row of the dusty auditorium, between a pair of students frantically exchanging notes from a previous class and a young man already fallen asleep over his books, and enjoys the thrum of easy anticipation.

No one is looking at the clock, and yet just as the hand ticks by quarter past, the room quietens. When Will walks in, he will have no need for shushes or greetings. Last time, he

stumbled through the door exactly two minutes late, dropped his bag on the desk, powered up the presentation without lifting his head up once, and then was about to move right into the crux of the matter—death—when he remembered Hannibal was there.

His eyes flicked to meet Hannibal's. He said, 'Afternoon.'

Not even a greeting—a gruff affirmation of the time of day, and yet the auditorium sunk into shock. Caught unawares, they couldn't think fast enough of a collective response, and mistimed themselves horribly: the few greetings scattered around the hall came out odd and awkward in the largeness of the confusion.

'Let's get on with it,' Will cut through, straightened, pushed his glasses higher up his nose—and spoke about death.

The clock ticks by another minute. It is now twenty-three past. Will's tardiness has officially been noted. Gradually, the lecture hall fills with whispers.

At half past, all pretence is abandoned. Chairs creak as backs lean and feet are pushed out, a soda can fizzles somewhere in the back row, and conversations soar in volume.

'I wonder,' Hannibal turns to the young agent next to him, who has officially given up on her notes, 'is Professor Graham often late?'

She shakes her head. 'He's never late. I mean, yeah, a couple minutes maybe, once. Maybe he got called away to a scene or something, but then usually someone comes in to tell us.'

'I see.'

'I don't know, should we go to admin and ask?' the agent nudges her friend, who looks entirely disinterested in the sort of proactivity required. 'They're gonna have his number, aren't they? Maybe they can call him.'

'I will call,' Hannibal says.

It is clear both girls are still young and self-involved, because they have no reaction whatsoever to learning that Hannibal is in possession of Professor Graham's personal number.

Hannibal calls twice. There is no answer the first time.

The second time, a voice heavy with sleep croaks into the receiver, '—Yeah?'

'Hello, Will.'

'Uhm—hello?'

The *hello* sounds wrong. It takes Hannibal a second to realize it is because it's the *hello* one offers to a stranger.

'This is Doctor Lecter speaking.'

‘Oh.’ A cough to clear his throat: it doesn’t help. ‘You okay?’

‘I am well, thank you. I’m in Quantico—’

‘Why are you in Quantico?’

‘—I hoped to sit in on your lecture.’

‘Okay?’

It’s as though the confusion has locked him in shut, and much as he tries, he cannot quite escape sleep.

‘I will be in Wolf Trap in half an hour,’ Hannibal decides.

‘—uh, right, fine—but—’

‘We’ll talk when I get there. Yes, Will?’

‘Right—yeah. Okay.’

This is certainly interesting.

‘Excuse me,’ he says to the girls, who are now watching him like hawks, and stands up.

He’s been to Wolf Trap only a handful of times; the winding road through the final bit of the woods strikes him as an entirely new place every time. Today, the skies above are all gloom. The trees bow their heads, trailing heavy hanks of golden leaves. Today, the road is time passing, he decides. It’s old age and it’s the end in sight.

He climbs up the porch, then knocks. When nothing answers him except commotion, he pushes the door open. Unlocked in anticipation of his arrival? For the dogs? Or has Will been forgetting to lock up for the night?

Over his previous visits, Hannibal has found he doesn’t much care for the house. The design is an assortment of furniture and trinkets that fall together into a single note: well-made, solid, dependable. The cobalt blue of the walls agrees with the pastels of cushions, and the pastels of cushions agree with the dark wood; the true care devoted to the construction and preservation of this space is evident. It is not a care Hannibal recognizes as Will’s. It *is,* obviously—Will has signed his name across the walls, across the creaking floor, he has left his mark on every choice made here—but it is a Will Hannibal doesn’t know. And he doesn’t like it.

But today, he likes the house. Today, nothing here feels dependable.

The dogs pounce on Hannibal the moment he enters, but it’s the smell that threatens to knock him over: there’s the sweet tang of fever, yes, but also urine, clogged drains and decomposition.

He offers his hands for the dogs to sniff, then moves across to the lounge to open the wide window. The dogs' beds, laid out in a madman's chessboard in front of the fireplace, are the source of at least half the stench. One, he can see, bears a dark stain—how many hours of agitation did it take for one of the dogs to finally relieve itself right here, on its own bed?

He walks deeper into the house, passing the nook where Will's bed sits, the stairway up, the study. In the kitchen, he finds a tribute to transience: mounts of dirty dishes, dog food strewn around the floor, mould growing over scraps left on the bottom of bowls.

Footsteps thud on the stairs. There's a sound of slipping, then a louder thud and a curse. Will hobbles into the kitchen, freshly washed and glistening. Hannibal takes him in: the flimsy shorts advertising a black bruise on his thigh, the T-shirt wrapped around a sinking stomach, the smell of rot flowing freely from his mouth. The nails which he cut short on one hand, but forgot on the other.

The eyes, finally: a gloomy blue still overcast with sleep.

Hannibal hopes suddenly that one day, Will might simply not wake up. It's a brief thought, because in the next moment he remembers how beautiful Will is in struggle and in pain; but for a second, seeing him here now, he wishes Will the quick death that comes before morning.

'Hey,' Will wheezes. 'I called, class is cancelled. All good.'

Hannibal thinks about raising his eyebrow, but then Will can sense his disapproval without.

'Forgot it was Friday. I was working late and lost track.'

'I see.'

Silence follows. Will doesn't bother pretending he's not working hard to avoid Hannibal's eye.

'I packed some sandwiches for lunch—let me make you breakfast,' Hannibal offers. His hands itch to start clearing up the wreckage of Will's forgotten Fridays.

'No—'

'Have you eaten?'

'No,' Will's head turns sharply to the side, like he can't bear to have Hannibal looking at him. 'I'm not hungry.'

'You will be once you've started eating.' Hannibal decides to allow him this small mercy and tears his gaze away. He turns on the tap. The water takes a while to heat up, but once it does, it is blistering. 'Do you have eggs?'

'Look—thank you for checking up on me, but you should go.'

Hannibal ignores him. There's something dark setting fast in his stomach, weighing down until he has to shift his hips there and back to accommodate it. 'What were you working on last night?'

'The Ripper.'

'There was a new development?'

'No, I was reviewing some old files—'

'That doesn't sound very pressing.'

'Yeah, well, it wasn't.'

The sink has filled. Hannibal turns off the tap and starts on identifying the worst of the dishes to set to soak.

'When was the last time you let the dogs out, Will?'

'I—Can you stop doing that?'

'I need to clear up some space to make breakfast.'

The next plate, Will yanks from his hand.

Up close, the anger he's fighting to keep in check is obvious: his cheeks are painted with it, his mouth is pressed tight, his eyes sizzle. The dark thing in Hannibal's stomach opens its mouth wide.

'You're angry,' he notes idly.

Will snorts. 'Yeah. That's why I'm *asking* you—go.'

'You've lost your grip on reality for at least a full day, Will. Anger is a perfectly natural response.'

'I—' His teeth grind audibly behind the pursed lips, bitten raw. He closes his eyes and breathes through it. 'I know you're trying to help. I don't want to take it out on you. Alright?'

But *Hannibal* wants him to.

How is he meant to enjoy his last weeks with Will when Will won't show him what they are?

'You need help, Will.'

Will looks at him. He seems to hover over the phrasing of his rejection. Once he has settled on that, he fixes his eyes back on the wall to the side of Hannibal's head.

'I don't want your help,' he says.

Even in this, he is clever.

Hannibal pats his hands dry on the towel. In the silence, the sound chokes. Clever: if he'd said he didn't want help, Hannibal could stay and doubt him. But that possessive—*your* help, not just any help, only Hannibal's—well, even if Hannibal doubts the truth of it, he cannot possibly stay.

Rain drums on the car's hood as he drives back down the same roads that led him here. The water gathers in the potholes and the trenches that the wheels dug into mud on his way in. The rain feeds Will's moat, he thinks bitterly, until it's spilling rot on the banks and the best of boats can't make it to the other side. If not Hannibal, who will brave such a passage? Who will come to collect your body, Will?

Hannibal will not, that much is certain. Will doesn't want *his* help after all.

Once he reaches Baltimore, he realizes he doesn't want to go home. On the intersection, he turns and makes for Port Haven.

It would be entirely rude to show up announced, so he gives Abigail a precursory call to confirm she is available. She is. She has few places to be besides, of course. Also, Hannibal doesn't think she would dare deny him.

They sit in the conservatory. Rain taps on the glass roof and makes its way down in branching streams that are like the swelled veins of the day. It is a season when most patients prefer the warmth of the canteen or the game room, but Hannibal and Abigail wrap themselves in coats and scarves, and the coffee comes out of the thermos to blister their tongues, and they are just fine, if alone.

'Maisie's sleeping with Pat,' Abigail announces. She has propped her feet on the bench, knees pushed apart to allow room for her Tupperware. If Will would rather continue starving himself than eat Hannibal's offering, then that's fine. Hannibal has no trouble finding someone who'll appreciate it. There: maybe that is why he has come.

'I thought Maisie was sleeping with Kendall.'

'Well, Kendall tried to hang herself on the TV cord last week. They're on a break. What's in this?'

'Pecorino, artichoke, sundried tomatoes.'

He purposefully does not name the ham sticking out the side of the sandwich. It's only Culatello, but he enjoys the way she swallows the sigh before taking a bite.

'It's good,' she says, eyes perfectly blank.

Hannibal tucks his smile away for later, and eats.

Abigail eats, too. Some of the flour dusted over the rustic baguette brushes off on a loose strand of her hair. She isn't looking at him. She can and will force herself to meet his gaze, but only if it is essential for her purpose that he see the feeling behind what she says—fear,

certitude, determination. Today, she doesn't want him to know what she feels. No one, it seems, is in the mood for sharing with Hannibal today.

'You remind me of Will.'

That sparks an emotion too heady to shield, which is precisely why he said it. Abigail meets his eye: surprise—fear—hostility.

He wonders if she's going to ask for details. She doesn't. Her unwillingness to talk about Will far surpasses both curiosity and the inclination to give Hannibal the questions he wants.

'There's this thing in Jung,' she says instead, as though she didn't hear him. 'This idea of the, what's it called? Collective something. Imagination?'

'Collective unconscious.'

'That. It's—I want to believe that it's true. That I'm not alone in what I think. That there's something outside of just me and how I see the world, some bigger space. That there are things outside of us that we all share. But then *if* that's true—I think I didn't get the invite. Maisie and Pat did. It doesn't seem very fair.'

'I'm glad you're enjoying your reading.'

'Yeah.'

Hannibal considers her. She talks so beautifully of alienation sometimes: as though it is a physical ailment, or a thing stalking her into the night. He was correct in thinking Jung would fuel this poetic streak in her melancholia. It becomes her.

'The things we experience change the structure of our brains,' he says. 'The pathways carved into yours will be alien to Maisie and Pat.'

'I don't know, maybe I'm not special.' She yanks her scarf further up her neck, burying the chin in it. 'Maybe everyone feels this way, maybe there is no collective anything. And we're all obsessed with art and music and this idea of connection, because it tricks us into feeling like we're part of something outside of just ourselves.'

Hannibal smiles. 'You *are* special, Abigail.'

She smirks into her cup, then offers it obediently when he makes to top her off.

'Everyone's special,' she shrugs. 'I just don't think anyone can ever understand what I've been through. And if no one can ever understand, if I can't *tell it,* then, I don't know. What's the point?'

'I understand.'

'Some of it.'

Hannibal inclines his head to allow it. This is pretty on her, too: this rejection of her own singularity, the desperate hope that her life could be shared. He hasn't bothered with such things for many years.

He tries to imagine himself at her age, gangly and awkward, burning with want. A little younger than her when he killed his first, stupid about it and wishing he could tell. Pretty.

'Well, Doctor Bloom *doesn't* understand. She was here again yesterday.'

'I was under the impression you enjoyed Alana's company.'

'I do, until she tries to convince me to go play with the other children. If I sleep with Maisie, will that make her happy do you think?'

She intends to shock him, which is the most innocent thing he has ever seen her do.

'It would certainly shift the conversation onto new ground,' he admits. 'Though I do not think Pat would appreciate the tactic.'

Abigail snorts. But he's not been shocked enough, so she pushes, 'I wonder. Have you and Doctor Bloom done any *shifting*?'

Hannibal smiles. 'I would assure you we are only colleagues,' he says, 'if it weren't entirely inappropriate to discuss this with you at all.'

'And you would hate to do anything inappropriate.'

'I enjoy our conversations,' he teases, enjoying *this.* Then, he adds, satisfied when it makes Abigail choke on her coffee, 'But I am aware that anything past body disposal might be a step over the line.'

The rain departs once again as Hannibal gets back into his car. Every day is rain, he observes privately. He would say so to Abigail, but she has already gone back inside to escape the chill, and it might in any case be too bleak a thought to share with an already apathetic eighteen-year-old.

He wonders about their conversation on the drive back. The comment about Alana, in particular, lingers. It's likely she was merely fishing for a reaction, but Abigail is only alive because she is observant. What if Alana *has* displayed signs of increased interest? For a while now, Hannibal has found her entirely unenthusiastic about romantic attachments and entirely enamoured with denying herself Will; were she to shake free, Hannibal would be the most practical choice.

There could be benefit to it. Once Will is gone, Hannibal will need Alana firmly on his side. As a friend, he is already under her aegis; as a lover, he would be untouchable.

But the idea sits wrong in his stomach, like a tightness after a long run.

He has to change into a fresh shirt when he gets home, feeling sticky even though he can't see or smell much sweat. The fabric is rough against his skin. He doesn't like it. His trousers

sit odd, too, creased at the hip. Hannibal knows intellectually they are a perfect fit. He strips anyway.

Unbidden comes the memory of a man's face, faded by time into stark lines and blurred fillings. This is Abigail's doing. She makes him think of such things.

He gets dressed again. He drives to his office. He manages to banish the man's face from his immediate attention for the duration of two sessions, but it makes a comeback just before seven—before Will is due. *If* Will is due.

His name was Antanas Norkus. He was the first man Hannibal killed: that is why he's thinking of him now. Abigail killed her first with the hunting knife that Hannibal has since put away for safekeeping with unexpected tenderness, and Hannibal killed Antanas Norkus with a hunting knife, too.

His beard was curled and unkempt: he was of an age and character that made him careless with his looks. His stomach, Hannibal remembers, spilled from the belt's hold, but his shoulders were broad and his hands large and well-defined. He would have thought the shoulders his most attractive quality, but the hands were it. Even at fifteen, Hannibal could tell: he'd discovered an interest in art at the time, and went through obsessions one after the other with the shapes of noses, mouths, hands and feet.

His uncle had taken them to Vilnius to show them the sights, but it was the miserable second week of December when chill crusted around eyes and mouths, and in the end the warmth of the opera hall and the hotel conspired to remind Robertus that he'd spent the last decade of his life in the sunny south of France, which cut short all excursions. This was, of course, precisely as Murasaki had foreseen. She had refused to come: the grand history of Lithuanian culture and tradition, which Robertus lamented as near lost in Hannibal's generation, held approximately as much interest to her as hearing him complain about the cold.

Hannibal didn't attend the opera with his uncle, which he was glad for at the time: he didn't mind the opera, but he did mind being seen at the opera with his uncle. Fortunately, though Murasaki's little cousin was in many ways unlike her peers, Chiyoh shared with other seven-year-olds a distaste for opera singing, which she frequently made clear to Hannibal by way of miming an explosion of her eardrums anytime his uncle turned his back. And so, that December in Vilnius, Hannibal and Chiyoh left Robertus be and strolled around Christmas markets. Then, they hailed taxis to bring them and their sleigh to the nearest park.

It was there that Hannibal saw him, one afternoon just as dusk was breaking: a man in a thick cap pulled tight over the ears, watching the children race down the slope as he sipped from his steaming thermos. His expression betrayed nothing at all.

Hannibal didn't know how many years had passed since he saw him last. He never found out for sure. His parents and Mischa lay in empty graves marked with guesswork.

But it could have been a hundred years, and Hannibal would still remember the man's face.

It wasn't the flick of a switch: it was as though the power station had gone off. In the moment previous, it was important to make sure Chiyoh didn't dig her chin deep into the ground and

come home missing all her teeth—entirely probable with her preferred speed. Now, there was no Chiyoh at all: there were only children scaling the hill in squeals of laughter, and she was probably among them.

Hannibal remembers that it scared him, how quickly the life he lived was exposed as meaningless, in the face of this other life—his first and true.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets so he could fist them until they grew white. He walked up to the man whose face he remembered.

'What's that?' he asked, nodding at the thermos, in a tone of curiosity fit for a much younger child.

Norkus looked down at him. His memory wasn't as good as Hannibal's.

'*Krupnik,*' he said. 'Warms you right up. Too bad you're a bit young for it.'

Hannibal shrugged. 'I'm more cold than I am young.'

A smile. An offer. Hannibal pressed the thermos into his chin so there would be no arguing himself out of it, and took a chug. He'd tasted wine before, and a cocktail Murasaki couldn't finish, but this was sweeter and stronger, and burnt the disgust right out of his throat.

That was all it took, in the end: a wilful breach of a single boundary and Norkus was flapping there and back on his hook. Sledge-riding, he was laughing, you can break your back doing it, you know. But the cold is good for circulation at the end of it. Ah, but hunting in winter, now that was something Norkus enjoyed—you'd be a little scared, wouldn't you? Of bears and wolves and whatnot? But you have a gun, you see. No, no, you have to try it at least once; that's how you become a man.

Hannibal remembered the man's face, and he remembered too what the man liked. He liked response. He liked to feel as though maybe they wanted it. Hannibal hadn't been responsive enough to interest him then, a hundred years ago—but he was doing a fine job of it now.

They took a taxi to dinner, in a restaurant on the ground floor of a hotel in black-and-white marble. Whenever a stray eye glazed over them, Hannibal's stomach seized. But no one here knew him. No one would know his name. If Chiyoh had seen him leave with Norkus, Hannibal leaving would have been important, and the identity of the man a mere sidenote. Once she found her way to the hotel—she would, he though dispassionately, they'd been going there and back for days—crying about how he abandoned her would take up all of the time in which she could communicate to someone that there had been a man.

Hannibal didn't use words to explain to himself the reason this was important: preserving anonymity. No one seeing him. No one finding out he was with Norkus today. He knew why it was important, but it seemed like too big a thing to say.

After dinner, Norkus packed Hannibal into his car, black and slick, and drove them out of the city, until the front lights grew long and fierce, and the trees on either side of the mud road became so black you could not tell them apart from the skies.

They found the hunting cabin dark and silent. The icicles that hung from the water spout were as long as Hannibal's arm.

Norkus showed him the knives first, gleaming in the low light. He explained how a skinning blade differed from a drop point. He told Hannibal that fixed-blade knives were more dependable than folding knives, but either could cut an animal open all the same. Gently, he ran the tip of a knife over Hannibal's stomach, where his coat and jumper protected adequately against the bite. It made Hannibal shiver. That, in turn, made Norkus smile, and do it again.

Those days, Hannibal often felt that his body did not fit him: his limbs were too long and slim, his feet uncoordinated, his face stained with hormonal bloom. It didn't look like Hannibal felt, though Hannibal couldn't tell how he felt. But in the hunting cabin, the inadequacies of his body were a strength; his body made him look young and vulnerable, and it made him look soft and gangly and unrefined, and it was exactly how he needed to look. It didn't matter in the end if he looked like *himself*; what mattered were the things he could make others think, through looking alone.

'I've got to be careful,' Norkus said as he drew the blade away with a grin.

'Could you kill a person with that?' Hannibal asked. 'Would it be difficult?'

Norkus laughed. The oil lamp hung from the ceiling swung wildly as he thrust his head back. 'It would be *so* easy! All it takes is a slash to the throat, right here—or to an internal organ. The heart is protected by the ribs, you feel? But the liver, right here, I'll show you—that's in easy reach.'

Hannibal knew he should wait until they went further into the forest. But fear thrummed in his veins and the anticipation was unbearable: he wanted it too much and he wanted more for it to be over. And so, they had barely gone out onto the snow when he pounced, a shock to them both: a knife to the stomach, and again, and Hannibal's head thudded on a fallen branch, and Norkus's hands were grasping, his arms tightened around Hannibal's throat, holding him close to his chest as he struck with the knife again, blindly, grazing his own side —

It was *not* easy. Norkus had meant to sound tough, but this much was clear: he had never actually killed a man with a hunting knife.

Hannibal sat in the red snow after, his fingertips warmed with blood but his toes numb from the cold. Norkus's chest was still moving beneath his palm, and his eyes blinked wildly at Hannibal, but he could not move any more, and he could not speak. Hannibal hoped he understood enough, though, to see as he cut off a piece of his liver, which came flooding out with the guts, and put it in his mouth.

It was too horrid to chew, so he swallowed it whole instead.

'Warms you right up,' he told him, and stumbled away behind the nearest bush, and folded in half with a nausea so violent it felt like his innards were being ripped clear through.

And then, he heard that tell-tale crunch: heavy walking boots in fresh snow.

He was coming. The second man Hannibal has killed.

A rap on the door.

Hannibal looks down at his watch: it is four minutes past seven. He has lost track of time.

It takes him longer than usual to get to the door, though he isn't sure whether that's the weight in his legs or the way space seems to stretch around him.

Will is standing in the waiting room, and he does not look much different than fifteen-year-old Hannibal did that night.

'Do you have antiseptic?'

Hannibal does; but looking at him, he is not sure he has enough. Raw and angry scratches, deep as trenches, cover his hands and his arms, then climb up to twist like a noose around the neck. Where it sticks to his chest, the fabric of Will's shirt is heavy with blood.

He follows obediently when Hannibal tugs him into his chair. He looks utterly defeated.

Hannibal gets the antiseptic. He gets a bowl of water. He starts with his face, where blood has spilled into a round bruise that teases at Will's bottom lip.

Will sucks it in as he inhales the sting of alcohol.

'What happened, Will?'

'A wild animal,' he says. His eyes are glassy, confused. 'I found it in the forest.'

'I thought you were afraid to go into the forest.'

Will jerks his head *no*. 'I had to go check on it. I could hear it howling. I thought maybe it got caught in a trap. It was—I thought it was a dog. It *was* a dog. At first.'

'What did you do when you found this dog, Will?'

Will smiles, like he finds it sweet that Hannibal should need to ask. 'Gave it food. I brought it home, I washed it. It was hard to see with all the blood—but there were cuts, long, like scratches—like these.'

He raises his right hand, his own face twisting in surprise at finding it so damaged. Hannibal takes him by the wrist and returns the hand to his lap, where he has laid out a towel to catch any lingering fluids. He shifts on the hard floor. The rotators in his knees let out a soft crack.

'I thought maybe it got into a scuffle,' Will continues, either uncaring or unaware of the interruption. 'It was in real bad shape, and shaking—it would have been something bigger that got to it. Bigger than a coyote. Bigger—like a wolf, maybe. It was scared, but it didn't fight me, it was just quiet. No whining, no growling, nothing. Just the quiet. When I washed

the blood off, the fur was so smooth, it was like baby hair. It had a pretty bad graze on the hip there that needed stitches, so I did that. I was thinking maybe I can get you to have a look before I get it to the vet's—but I think they were fine anyway. Kept the skin together if nothing else.'

Hannibal helps him fully out of the shirt, then covers his shoulders with a blanket. Will is shaking from cold and shock, but he does not appear to realize either.

Hannibal examines his hands next, running the pads of his fingers up and down the blue skin to check for feeling. Will squirms a little and tenses—they are not a lost cause. Once they've been sanitised, he will take him into the bathroom and run warm water over them until blood seeps back in.

The fingernails are jagged at the edges, and dark with dirt and bits of skin. His own skin, Hannibal realizes: Will's skin.

'I was just putting the needle away, and I turn, and it's not a dog anymore. It's something—I don't know, it's cold and hungry and—maybe it was like that all along, but with all the blood I didn't see it. I'd locked the dogs away. I remember I heard them barking through the door. And then it threw itself on me—and it got its claws in, and then the teeth—and—'

He breaks, breathes. 'And that was it.'

Hannibal is struck with a thought. He looks up to meet Will's eye.

'You are not dead, Will.'

Will gives him a grimace. 'No,' he agrees softly. 'Not yet.'

Clarity returns to him over the next hour, as they stand together by the bathroom sink, as he dresses into Hannibal's sweater, as he drinks the herbal tea Hannibal finds in a box from the back of a cabinet. Hannibal thinks he can spot the moment of the switch: the moment when Will looks at his hands and realizes he has done this to himself. He refuses to talk about it. There is shame in this obstinacy, but more than that, there is fear: he knows Hannibal believes he is his own victim, but he cannot convince his mind of the same. The gorge between him and the world awes deeper each day; it is a feeling that is not easily told, and so resolves into muteness.

Hannibal knows that feeling.

He knows too that there is no moat tonight. As he is now, Will may want help or he may not want help, and it doesn't matter: he is entirely in Hannibal's power. If only until he finishes his tea.

'Are you still cold, Will?' he asks, wondering whether he should fetch his coat from the car.

Will shakes his head. 'Tea's helped,' he says without looking at Hannibal. 'Warmed me right up.'

Hannibal's throat tightens.

‘I asked Alana to take the dogs in for a little while.’

Hannibal tries to catch his eye but doesn’t manage it. ‘Why is that?’

Will huffs. ‘Why do you think? Could it be because I can’t be trusted to take care of anyone else right now?’

‘Caring for a human being tends to pose a greater challenge than caring for a dog.’

Will looks at him, frowning. ‘What does that have to do with anything?’

‘If you can’t take care of your dogs,’ Hannibal says evenly, ‘how can you take care of yourself?’

It takes a few seconds, but ever so slowly, Will smiles. Hannibal realizes he hasn’t seen him do that in a while.

‘You got me there.’

‘I did.’

‘Well, not to worry—I’ve still got Winston with me. I couldn’t give them all up, and he’s the smart one. Can open the door for himself. Runs hot. Likes to cuddle. He’ll take care of me.’

‘He may help keep you warm at night, but that is hardly—’

‘Oh, no. They’re not allowed to sleep with me. Lucky for them, honestly: someone would have lost an eye by now.’

Will appears set on levity. Hannibal tries to mind but can’t quite get there.

‘You surprised me,’ he acknowledges.

‘Thought we’d all sleep in one big pile, huh?’

Hannibal did. He imagined Will shed the human skin at night and settled in with his pack, king among them. ‘Yes,’ he says.

Will smiles again. The bruise on his lip makes it nightmarish. ‘The idea was always to find them new homes. People are more likely to take dogs trained into good manners. I pick up strays, I fatten them up a bit, I train the wild thing jitters out of them. Then I give them to a family with kids who think ugly’s kind of cute. It’s just that last part I’m having trouble with.’

Hannibal is filled with something warm and painful he cannot name. He doesn’t know how to speak through it, so he smiles at Will and hopes he isn’t asked to elaborate.

‘Might have to start getting better,’ Will muses. He is looking at Hannibal *now*, when Hannibal would really prefer that he didn’t. ‘Alana can keep them for a few weeks, but after that—’

‘I can ask around,’ Hannibal offers, ‘if you decide you’d like help.’

His voice goes rough at the final word. Will doesn’t miss it.

‘Careful, Doctor,’ he drawls, ‘or I’ll rope you into taking one. Betty, maybe. She’s almost your size, but you got a big house, don’t you?’

‘With an unfortunately small yard.’

‘That’s fine, she’s more of a lapdog anyway. Hates the wet. Needs a big lap, though.’

Hannibal has to look away from him.

After, Will insists on driving himself home.

‘If I could drive over like *that*,’ he says, ‘then I sure as hell can drive back now. Tell you what: when you decide it’s past time for the asylum or the morgue, you give me a lift then, okay?’

Hannibal stoppers the urge to tell him it isn’t funny.

Instead, he watches the red lights of Will’s truck through the window until they fade into the dark. They are drawing nearer and nearer to a conclusion, he thinks. There is no manipulation left to perform, there are no new paths to take—Will is not going to last much longer. The elusive threat he presents to Hannibal’s life here will be erased, and the grief will wedge a distance between him and the FBI once again.

This will be a shorter chapter than Hannibal had hoped, but the intensity will prove a counterweight. Will’s end will be beautiful and tragic, and Hannibal hopes he will cry watching it.

Yes. It is easier to see things plainly when Will isn’t here. He is a black hole into which Hannibal’s clarity seeps.

He goes home feeling considerably lighter, and falls into sleep easily, lulled by the ache in his knees and the strain in his hands.

He dreams of the first man he has killed. The red snow around him, the hunting knife dropped amid his own vomit. He knows he is making a mess of it, he knows he needs to clean this up, he knows he’s left the body too close to the hunting cabin. But it is all too much for him, it is all new and heady, and he cannot think.

The crunch of boots. He turns.

A man stands before him, wrapped in a worn coat with a dozen pockets. His face is obscured by the cap he wears and a dark fringe that falls over his eyes. He holds a hunting rifle, but he doesn’t point it at Hannibal. That is, of course, bizarre. He must have realized by now Hannibal had killed Norkus—he must see that he is dark with blood, that it is flowing right from his mouth.

The man leads Hannibal back to the cabin, and Hannibal does not argue. He feels like a captive of his own mind. Every time he blinks, he sees the way Norkus looked at him in his final moments. When he swallows, he tastes the wet warmth of his liver. He has dropped the knife, but he feels the weight of it in his hand. He cannot imagine how it is to see or taste or feel anything else; now that he's done it, now that he knows, he doesn't think anything can ever compare.

The man sits him down. He sets the rifle by the door, then he kneels on the floor at Hannibal's feet, and takes off his cap.

It's Will.

And Hannibal knows immediately that it's wrong, that it cannot be Will: the face of the second man he killed was not *Will's* face, it was a different face altogether. But now that he has seen this one, he cannot remember anything else. And the longer he stares at it, as blood is wiped off his face and his hands, as he obediently sips the icy water and shakes with returning pain when alcohol is poured over the scratches from roots and branches—the less he can remember why it felt so wrong in the first place.

Will struggles with the buttons in Hannibal's coat until finally he wrenches it open and pulls up the bloodied shirt—hands warm on skin.

'This will need stitches,' he says in English, which feels wrong too, though Hannibal cannot tell why. 'I've patched up shirts before. Can't be that different. You worried?'

Hannibal isn't, because he doesn't know what's going on. But it feels like he is meant to nod, so he does. Will throws him a smile.

'Don't worry,' he says. 'I'm joking. I've stitched up plenty of dogs. It won't be the prettiest, but it'll keep the skin together. Hold that up for me?'

Hannibal accepts the folds of the shirt. There's blood and grime under his fingernails.

He watches Will's face as he works: the knit in his brow when he focuses, the care contained in the way he bites into the corner of his lip.

'There we go.'

When he reaches, it is to run his fingers through Hannibal's hair, crusted with blood, and fish out a twig that got knotted near the ear.

Then, a thread of confusion. Will is reaching again, fingers gentle against the side of Hannibal's head, and he's shaking his head, half-surprise, half-exasperation. 'So soft,' he wonders. 'It's like baby hair.'

Hannibal knows somewhere deep down that he has at his disposal the perfect out. Will knows he killed Norkus, yes, but he believes it was self-defence; he thinks Hannibal is a traumatised little thing that needs his protection, and he will say so to anyone who dares ask. But while it was easy to play at vulnerability with Norkus, it is much too hard now.

Hannibal takes the needle Will used to sew him up whole, and he shoves it into Will's eye.

The threat of this man cannot be allowed. And so, Hannibal kills his second, there on the floor of the hunting cabin, with no weapon to wield except the fevered desperation that's all nails and teeth.

He wakes with a start into the grey of his Baltimore bedroom. He has to flick on the bedside lamp to erase the fears from the dark corners.

This is bizarre. Hannibal has a good visual memory, and when he dreams of the past, it is almost like playing back a recording. And this particular memory—the first and last time he has taken a life with such rabid hunger, like a madman, like an animal—he has reviewed enough to know its every crevice.

But even now, he struggles to recall the face of the hunter who found him that night. It's imperfectly concealed beneath the shadow of Will's open concern.

The alarm clock reads seven. It is Saturday and he has little to do beyond the market and a few chores. He could stay in bed, but in the end sees no point in it.

Seven thirty-three. It was irresponsible of him to allow Will to drive when he knows him to experience regular seizures. Yes, he will be dead soon in any case, but a road accident is such a mundane way to go, and entirely unfitting for a man who nearly ripped into his own throat just the day previous.

Seven fifty-eight. Hannibal's breakfast tastes like raw liver.

At two past eight, he calls.

The three dial tones are too many. A wreck by the side of the road: so vulgar.

A crackle in the signal. 'Morning,' a voice rasps. Hannibal purses his lips so tight it hurts.

'Good morning, Will,' he says. 'How are you feeling today?'

A laugh, distorted over the line. 'I'm good. How are you feeling today?'

Hannibal's lip quirks. 'Good,' he echoes. 'Thank you for asking.'

'Well, now you know I'm alive, feel free to, uh, carry on with whatever you get up to when you're not picking up the pieces. I'm heading off to D.C.'

'A body?'

'Yeah, they just called it in. Local police think it's the Ripper, so now I'm involved. Christ.'

Hannibal stumbles, instinctively trying to recall what he has done before he remembers he hasn't done anything. 'Is it?'

‘Hell if I know. Their reasoning is, and I quote, *it’s all symbolic and shit.* So, that’s gonna be fun.’

Hannibal doesn’t let himself think about it. ‘Would you mind if I joined you?’ he asks.

‘You want to come look at me look at a dead body? You got nothing better to do with your weekend?’

‘I haven’t made plans,’ Hannibal says, then lies quickly, ‘and I must confess in all my time living in Baltimore, I have never properly explored Washington. It would be an opportunity to see the sights. If you can afford to wait an hour, we could drive down together.’

‘Meaning *you* could drive *me* down.’ Hannibal hears the smile. But then, Will’s tone sobers. ‘Look, you don’t—you’re the psychiatrist. You know how these things go. I hope that means you can figure out for yourself when it’s time to pull back. I’m not—I don’t really like to talk about it, but I think we both know how this might end. And if things go south, I don’t want you to get caught up in it. Yeah?’

There is no one to see him, so Hannibal allows himself the luxury of closing his eyes, and leaning his weight against the counter, and sagging into the way the statement knots around his lungs. ‘There’s no need for you to worry about that, Will.’

‘I worry that you don’t worry. Just promise me you’re going to give that some thought.’

He is right and Hannibal hates it. ‘I promise.’

He will give it some thought. Later. For now, he will drive Will to Washington and pretend he is seeing the Capitol for the first time in his life, and he will drink from the Will he has available to him until he is out of breath. He needs to fill up as much as he can, and he needs to hurry.

He doesn’t think he has much time left.

Chapter End Notes

> Will: It looks like I'm either dying or losing my mind. Okay, new priority: let's see how much blatant flirting at my psychiatrist I can get in before I go.

The Predator

Chapter Summary

A crime scene, a failed attempt at negotiation, and a museum date.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three: The Predator

The boy sat at the kitchen table has his eyes shut loosely, as if in sleep. His guts brush where his feet perch one on top of the other in an absent-minded posture of childish unrest. The blood has stained his pyjamas a copper brown.

The door hasn't yet swung shut behind them and Will is already speaking.

'I know him.'

'You *know* him?'

Will shakes his head. 'No, I mean—the killer. The killer knew him.'

Jack's gaze is severe, laced with a concern he doesn't know how to spend. 'That was fast,' he grumbles. 'Alright, let's clear the scene—Katz, can you finish that later? Come on, people.'

'Let the wizard do his magic, I get it.' Beverly Katz rises with a grunt, her eyes on Will. He doesn't meet her gaze, but there is a crack in him: his hand goes straight for the pocket to hide the tremble. 'Hey, Mr Magic Man, you want coffee?'

Will gives her a nod, chin lodged firmly into his chest. He looks unlike himself today. Or, rather, he looks like a Will Graham who doesn't hallucinate monsters and doesn't forget to eat for days at a time—he is, Hannibal has to admit, quite skilled at hiding.

On her way out, Ms Katz's eyes linger on Hannibal and her tread slows. She intends to let him out the door first; Hannibal pretends not to notice.

'The bodyguard staying?'

'Doctor Hannibal Lecter,' Jack introduces him swiftly. 'Beverly Katz; have you met?'

'Briefly,' Hannibal says smoothly. 'Ms Katz.'

'Oh yeah, no, I remember. They call you in for a consult again, or are you just a fan?'

Hannibal smiles. ‘A fan of the work you do? Certainly.’

‘He’s here for the sights,’ Will interjects. ‘Don’t interrogate him.’

She meets Hannibal’s eye again, the nebula of the initial suspicion forming fast until it sets into shape. ‘Just curious. You want coffee, Doctor?’

‘Thank you, Ms Katz, I’m fine.’

She nods, smiles off-angle with a hint of teeth, and finally says, with an overt glance at Will’s turned back, ‘Enjoy the sights then.’

Will’s shoulders draw up, though it is near impossible to tell if it’s laughter or tension. Jack is opening his mouth for censure, but the door is already shut behind her, and it’s only the silence of the dead room that stands witness.

‘I will,’ Hannibal says, because he can. This time, he catches Will’s snort.

‘Alright, *enough*,’ Jack barks. ‘This one’s Edward Tussey, twenty-three. There’s another body in the bedroom, so let’s look at that before you do your mojo.’

Will nods again. Hannibal can see him physically trying to reign *his mojo* in. It is very soon for Will to be turning outward; there is usually a moment of conscious effort involved, a shift as he brings down his walls. Perhaps the illness has thinned the lines. Perhaps it’s the headiness of the room, the way that Edward Tussey looks younger than he is in his pyjamas and soft robe, the way he is leaning over his cereal like he is just about ready to head off for the day—whatever has made Will so, Hannibal hates it. He feels strangely as though something is being wrenched away from him. As though the fact that Will can fade so quickly means he has never been there in the first place.

As though if Hannibal sat him down by the breakfast table like the killer did Edward Tussey, if he cut him open across the stomach and plunged his arms in deep, he would find him empty.

The second body is stretched in the king bed. The guts rest to the side, halfway over the breakfast tray.

‘Eliza Kearney, forty-six. She was renting the suite. So far, no connection between her and Tussey.’

‘A dalliance?’ Hannibal suggests. ‘Perhaps—’

‘They didn’t know each other,’ Will interrupts. Hannibal’s lips narrow. ‘No, this isn’t about them, this is about *me*. I—the killer made breakfast, he dressed her in satin pyjamas of all things, look at that, and I gave the kid a cereal bowl like we’re not in a fucking hotel room paid for by the night—this is a farce.’

His eyes are glazed over, empty. His voice isn’t his own. The hand in his pocket is still shaking. Hannibal wants to still it, but he is suddenly afraid at the mere thought of touching him. Has there always been this much empty space in Will? Why is he only seeing it now?

Will walks up to the side of the bed and runs his fingers down Eliza's blue cheek.

'Give him a moment,' Jack mutters, eyes fixed on Will's wandering hands.

'This is what I'm meant to have.' His words are slurring. 'What I'm meant to—what I want. But I can't have it because I can't make them love me. Because I am not made for it. This should be our house. They would be alive and this would be our house. I brought her breakfast in bed, and the kid's off in five minutes, he's taking the car, is that alright?' A laugh, not Will's. 'Yeah, hell. Everyone's got to have it and there's nothing wrong with me that I can't have it too. Just not made for love.'

Jack has heard enough. 'So what, guy gets rejected, stalks her to the hotel, snags a random kid from the lobby to stand in for all the happy family life they could have had?'

Will gives a half-shake. 'I *know* him. I know them both, but it's not about—they are themselves, but they're also stand-ins. A running theme. This is what happens every time.'

'He's done this before?'

Will looks to Hannibal for aid.

'The killer purposefully chose his victims to symbolise his struggle to connect with the world,' Hannibal translates. 'There is a divide between what he feels and what he wishes he could feel that extends to all of his relationships.'

Will nods. Hannibal turns to hide his pleasure.

'He knew the woman well enough to find out when she'd be renting the room. He might have even suggested she did,' Will continues, clarity dripping back into his vowels. 'Could be a lover, a family friend, close co-worker. She's the, uh, romantic partner stand-in, so he'll be around her age, maybe a little older. Regular-looking, even handsome. Well-paid job, probably in corporate. Nothing apparently wrong with him. But you might have more luck with the kid. Look at mentorship programmes, things like that. Killer could be a teacher, tutor, co-worker tasked with rope-showing. They won't know each other well, but he would have had an opportunity to see him as a protégé.'

Jack is already pulling out his phone. 'Not the Ripper then, huh?'

Will laughs. 'No, not the Ripper. That's, uh, that's pretty obvious.'

Hannibal dislikes the way he says it, *obvious*. Why is it obvious? There is nothing whatsoever about Hannibal that should be obvious.

'Alright. Let's go one more round in case we missed anything, and then I'll let you go have your coffee. You look like shit, Will.'

'Thanks.'

They do another round, steps soft against the carpeted floor. It's a poor choice to be killing in a place with so much carpet; is that why it's obvious? His next victim, Hannibal is going to

take from a room with carpet.

The more he looks, the less Hannibal likes the scene painted before him. It's a desperate grasp at a thing beyond reach, a wish so mundane it is vulgar. The presentation is simple, prosaic, almost uninspired. And yet, it strikes a chord. Hannibal cannot decide whether to be impressed or annoyed.

'He pulled out most of their intestines, liver and kidneys too,' Jack tells Will. 'Everything accounted for.'

Will leans against the doorframe. He's trying to hide the fact he is too exhausted to stand straight.

His gaze softens as it falls on Edward Tussey by the breakfast table. 'He is not made for love,' he says, voice a murmur. 'To make them love him, he has to pervert them. He has to empty them of who they are, or else it's impossible.'

'Or perhaps he needs the room for himself,' Hannibal counters. 'He cannot make himself love them unless they have been perverted and emptied out of who they are.'

Will smiles. 'Up to interpretation.'

The Bureau have taken up the room opposite. It buzzes with agents in cheap-fabric jackets and long faces. The coffee machine hisses bubbles of sharp aroma, bitter and shallow. Hannibal doubts Will can taste anything but heat, because he downs his cup on a single breath, then swallows two aspirin dry.

'Not the Ripper,' Ms Katz states once Will is returned to the world of the living.

'Not the Ripper.'

She gives a victorious grin. 'Told them. Scene's clean, but not Ripper-clean.'

Obviously, Hannibal thinks.

'We're leaving for the lab in half an hour. You coming?'

Will shakes his head. 'Call me when you have something.'

Somehow, she catches the aborted look. 'Ah, right, the *sightseeing*. There's a Madame Tussauds near here.'

'That's the one then,' Will deadpans. 'See you.'

They leave the car and walk down the streets bristled with rain. Murky rivulets run down the sidewalk, staining Hannibal's shoes. He didn't anticipate Will taking the notion of sightseeing seriously. Perhaps fever has carved clarity out of him, and he truly hasn't seen through Hannibal's poor deception.

There is a weight to him now, where he walks by Hannibal's side, like the killer's desperation has taken root in him. It's unbecoming. If Will is to be empty, then Hannibal has plenty he can fill him with: there is really no need for outside contribution.

'Where do you actually want to go? There's a portrait gallery across the street. And another museum, I think it's modern art or something—you probably know better than me.'

'I will rely on your expertise—'

'You've seen them all, I get that, but we're not walking around in the rain pretending you've not been to D.C. a hundred times.'

'Where would *you* like to go?'

Hannibal suspects the answer is *home*, but Will doesn't say that. Instead, he leads them up and over into the sprawling hall of the Smithsonian Natural History Museum. The domed ceiling disappears into the light that pierces the rain clouds. It dapples the floor in warm puddles.

'Came here with my dad my first time in D.C.,' Will says. 'I was maybe fifteen.'

Hannibal imagines an adolescent Will leaning out the balustrade that snakes around the tall lobby, hoping to reach far enough to brush his fingers against the trunk of the elephant statue. He would have been either too serious for his age or too childish, or maybe both at once.

'Where else did you visit?'

'Oh, everywhere that's free. It was a birthday present, I think. We had three days and you better believe we made full use. I think I got tonsilitis at the end of it.'

The smile isn't on his face, but it's twined into his voice. Hannibal pretends to read the information card for the North Atlantic Whale, to give him his moment.

'Can't remember anywhere else we went,' Will finally says, too lightly. 'Just here.'

He steps in close to let a family of five pass them by. The scent of him is an assault: there's the unmistakeable note of illness, there's that sweet fever and cheap coffee and exhaust fumes, but there is too something new and clean. Hannibal has to swallow first before he can begin to try and name it—it's a smell that makes him want to curl up and breathe nothing else, that makes him think of cream of wheat and plum preserve and the skin on a mug of warm milk.

'New detergent?' he asks roughly.

'Huh? Oh. Yeah, I was in a rush and picked up something random—I think it was the baby one.'

It was. The smell is, Hannibal can tell now, the smell of the fresh terry diapers he'd put over his head to make Mischa giggle. What a strange association to have come to him, here now, in the middle of all this.

‘You want coffee?’

Hannibal doesn’t, but it is obvious Will is only asking because the walk has worn him out. Unsteady on his feet, he leads Hannibal to the café situated to the back of the atrium, guarded by a giant model of a long-extinct predator, a mega-toothed shark suspended from the ceiling.

Hannibal gets a coffee. He considers the food, but it is all served on paper plates, which renders it immediately unpalatable. For himself, Will gets another coffee and a sandwich. Hannibal suspects it is his first meal of the day.

The high chairs in aquamarine plastic creak and strain under their weight. They are horribly uncomfortable. The coffee is fine.

‘How is your sandwich?’

‘Honestly, I have no idea,’ Will shrugs, taking another bite. ‘I can’t taste much. That’ll be my imaginary brain tumour.’

‘A week ago, you were adamant to look for a physical cause.’ Hannibal caresses the edge of his coffee cup, catching the dew gathered on paper. ‘Now you believe your illness imaginary?’

‘Isn’t that what you believe?’

The way they sit, Hannibal can see both Will and the shark model at once, drawn with a blurring line in the background. Its awing jaws, each tooth the size of an adult’s hand, hover just above Will’s head, about ready to swallow him whole.

‘I believe your illness is psychosomatic. That does not mean it’s imaginary.’

Will waves him off. ‘Same difference.’

‘It is not the same difference.’

‘Isn’t it? My mind’s given up on my body or the other way round. What does it even matter why? I’m not interested in validation, Doctor Lecter. That is not why I’m here.’ He draws a quick breath, short on oxygen from the exertion of the tirade. He picks up the pamphlet a previous visitor left behind on the table. ‘*Carcharocles megalodon,*’ he reads. ‘Glorious shark, big tooth. That’s a nice name.’

‘Will.’

‘Too bad they went extinct. I’d have liked to see these prowling Chesapeake Bay. The Ripper could toss his bodies right in for them to eat: no body, no case, no need for Will Graham. He’d enjoy that I think. And then I wouldn’t be going insane, right? Might be able to tell you if the sandwich is any good.’

The line of his jaw is so tight, it looks as though the bone might snap. Bitterness flows from him freely, though Hannibal cannot easily tell who it is he is most angry with: whether Jack

Crawford, Hannibal, the world, or fate. Or perhaps himself, for failing to shoulder the combined burden of them all.

‘I imagine Jack Crawford might eventually have persuaded you to go diving for the evidence,’ Hannibal teases, feeling hollow, and uncannily as though his voice sounds more like Will’s voice and less like his own. ‘That would be a new artistic direction for the Ripper: an interactive installation.’

When Will laughs, the bitterness drains out. His body is much like a sieve: riddled with holes, it cannot hold any one emotion for long. ‘More accessible to the general public,’ he agrees. ‘Swimming with the Ripper’s little toothy friends—might be a better way to go anyway.’

And Hannibal isn’t sure what it is that he’s thinking, exactly, when he says, ‘You could stop.’

Will looks up sharply. ‘I could *stop.*’

‘You speak to me of death as though it’s inevitable.’ He finds himself leaning forward, hands flat and sure on the pleasant cool of the table. ‘If not death, then madness. But it is not. Turn your back on the FBI once and for all. Find an alternative occupation that doesn’t grind away at your skull. If your symptoms do not subside, we’ll know there is a physical cause after all —’

‘There isn’t. That’s what your doctor said.’

‘He might have missed something. A second opinion—’

‘No.’ Will shakes his head like he’s trying to dislodge his neck from his spine. ‘No, I’m not wasting my time seeing a doctor again just so they can tell me I’m making this up. I’m *done.*’

‘You are not making it up, Will,’ Hannibal says roughly. ‘You are killing yourself. Stop.’

There’s a fevered, shivery, awful thing in Hannibal’s chest, and the thing is hope, impossible but imperative. If he could persuade Will to leave; to never spend another moment thinking of the killers lodged in the folds of his capitulating brain; if he could dull his teeth and distract his eyes.

He could keep him then.

‘I can’t stop,’ Will whispers. It comes out like he’s trying not to choke on it. ‘You know I can’t. The bodies aren’t stopping.’

‘That is not your responsibility to bear, Will.’

‘Yeah, no one’s ever responsible, are they?’ A grimace tears his features in half. ‘No one’s responsible until you make yourself responsible. And then you’re fucked for the rest of your life.’

‘For you, that may not be a very long time.’

Will shows his teeth. ‘No. So I might as well do something useful in the meantime. I was looking through the Ripper files—no, listen—and I can *feel* I’m getting closer. Like I’m slotting into it more easily every time I go and look at a photo. Jack thinks I’m the only one who can catch him, which is bullshit. No one’s born with some predestined disposition for catching him, no one has anything on him except if they make themselves responsible. If someone’s gonna be fucked for life, it might as well be me, right? Won’t be for very long anyway.’

Hannibal breathes through the way the hope in him twists, pulls, *yanks*.

‘And if your final act is to catch the Chesapeake Ripper—will that make your death worth it?’

‘It can’t hurt.’

‘I can’t accept that.’

Will closes his eyes. ‘I know.’

He knows. But it doesn’t matter.

Those who are destined to die cannot be saved: Hannibal should know that much by now. It only hurts that Will was not preternaturally built to last so little; he has played destiny’s hand, he has made the choice to take responsibility, and he has brought the inevitable onto himself.

Once Will has finished the last of his sandwich, they climb up to the second floor, where a butterfly pavilion advertises itself in bold letters across a human-sized poster. The assistant stood to the side gives Hannibal a smile, but the entrance is at an extra cost, and Will steers him away into the mammals’ exhibit instead.

The floors here are lain with blue carpet. The skeletons behind glass peer at them with the gouges of their eyes. Many are herbivores, hoofed and lame, but stripped of flesh even they take on a menace. Or maybe it is just how Will regards them, the muscles in his neck tight as a knot.

He has been nothing but reasonable practicality this last hour, but it strikes Hannibal as a false platitude now: a mask put on to shield whatever it is that lives in him, ready to pounce.

And it does pounce. A sweat breaks over Will’s brow.

‘Will?’

‘I’m fine,’ he whispers. ‘Just feel like one of them is going to rip my throat out any moment. They’re moving.’

‘Are they?’

Will glares at him.

‘Is it your monster from the woods, peering out at you from the bone?’

He nods. Hannibal imagines the skeletons shifting where they stand, joints cracking, heads tilting. Couples and children move to-and-fro, never paying them any mind, yet Hannibal cannot escape the sense that they are being watched.

‘A patient of mine once said he feels as though no matter where he is, there is always a predator in the room with him: lying in wake in the shadows. I advised he must convince himself this is not true. But it *is* true. For you.’

Will says nothing. Hannibal reminds himself of the emptiness he sensed in him. Why not fill it now?

‘What if the predator in the room were you?’ he asks.

A grimace. ‘That’s—that’s not what I want to be.’

‘A propensity that follows you like a shadow. There are aspects of who we are that we would like to deny, but which remain undeniable. Perhaps you should turn around and meet him head-on, your shadow.’

‘What did I say about Jung?’

Hannibal lets it go. It would not do to push too soon, even if that may mean he never has enough time to—

Will’s fingers clasp around Hannibal’s forearm.

He follows his gaze to where an antlered creature stands in quills of yellowed bone. It is too small to be a stag, Hannibal thinks, and would not strike him as threatening were it not for Will’s tremble, the pounding of his heart that permeates Hannibal’s skin where it is clutched white—the widening of his eyes. The creature is bigger when Will sees it, and at once Hannibal feels on edge.

‘Look at me, Will,’ he orders, and Will obeys. His eyes are a variation on blue depending on the light, but the emptiness behind them makes Hannibal think of bottomless wells.

Without breaking eye contact, he leads Will out of the corridor and into the butterfly pavilion. No protest comes when he buys the tickets. Will clutches him like a lifeline. He doesn’t appear half-aware of why they are here.

Inside, the air is kept warm and wet, and Will calms by degrees. The butterflies are specks of colour against the deep greens of the leaves, plump with water. The pavilion is set into a tunnel of flimsy-looking sheet metal; the panels keep out most of the light, and though there is a modest opening in the middle that faces the window, the overcast skies refuse to come to aid. Rain still patters against the glass, but the chill that creeps through the cracks dissipates before it ever reaches them.

A red admiral perches in Will’s hair, the black of its wings a perfect camouflage. Only the bloody red tips are visible; they twitch as the butterfly scents Will’s shampoo.

‘I think we should steal him,’ Will says, no trace in his voice of the terror he brewed. Hannibal wonders if he even remembers it. ‘Or do you want me to find you something more exotic?’

‘Please.’

Hannibal watches him as he wanders, steps light and careful to ensure he doesn’t spook any of the pavilion’s inhabitants. He might have made a fine predator in another life. In this one, there is nothing of it to him, his intent smooth and soft as baby skin.

Eventually, Will returns, and hunches on the floor at Hannibal’s feet, peering up close at a butterfly concealed from Hannibal’s gaze by the thick leaves of a rainforest bush. He cannot see Will’s face either; when he looks down, he sees only the tip of his head, and the way his hands shake minutely.

‘Thank you for taking the time to bring me here.’

Will looks up. He is about to give a worn, meaningless acknowledgement, but then his face changes, and he says instead,

‘Could be the last time I get to bring you anywhere. Or be *brought*, as is the case.’

Hannibal’s mouth is dry. ‘This isn’t a line of thought you want to be pursuing, Will.’

‘Maybe. But I’m tired.’ Another butterfly sits on the knuckle of his right hand. Hannibal doesn’t know this one’s name; it’s a bold ultramarine. ‘Still had a better run than this guy, didn’t I?’

‘Butterflies live briefly but intensely.’ Hannibal doesn’t quite know what it is he’s saying. It barely makes a sound in his own ears. ‘Their lives are periods of constant transformation and triumphant beauty. They are perhaps made more impressive for how short they last.’

Will shows his teeth in a laugh. ‘I’m no butterfly, Doctor Lecter,’ he reproves. ‘A moth, maybe. Helplessly drawn to the thing that kills me.’

A breeze budges at the clouds. Sun streams through the creak, warm on the back of Hannibal’s neck. Will has to narrow his eyes to keep looking up at him.

‘Moths are drawn to the light,’ Hannibal says hollowly.

‘Yeah,’ Will says. ‘Too bad they’re not made for it.’

Chapter End Notes

Next time, a visit from Alana and a shake-up of Hannibal's best-laid plans.
Thank you for reading!

The Shadow

Chapter Summary

Hannibal is visited by Alana. Will is visited by something else.

Chapter Notes

A quick explanation: when editing, I've realized some of the sexual content in later chapters came out a little steamier than I originally intended. I've upped the rating to explicit to be safe.

Without further ado, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four: The Shadow

It is precisely a week later that Hannibal receives the first message from Will that he doesn't read.

He gives it a minute first, then two. The tension grows but doesn't snap. He will have to cut him loose soon and needs to start adjusting his routine accordingly. Even further, with Will's recent declaration that apprehending the Ripper would ideally constitute his dying act, Hannibal understands that caution is essential.

Two minutes turn into three, and then the doorbell chimes. Hannibal pretends to be distracted.

When she comes in, Alana's scarf and hair are powdered with snow, loose and fickle; she pats at the hair with a glove to dislodge it while Hannibal does the same to the scarf, then hangs it near the radiator to dry.

Dinner is miso soup and temaki sushi, because Alana has requested something light and because Hannibal finds it amusing to watch her work the chopsticks. He lists the ingredients for her and explains the process, and she is almost as focused on listening as she is on the chopsticks. Hannibal has left his phone in the kitchen and doesn't even miss it.

'Where did you learn Japanese?'

'I strive to learn the original name of every dish I prepare.'

‘You know more Japanese than that.’ She narrows her eyes. ‘Your tone changes when you switch, and the timbre of your voice is different.’

Hannibal smiles. ‘Well-observed. My aunt was Japanese. We usually spoke English with one another, but she knew a little Lithuanian and I knew a little Japanese, and we enjoyed our variety.’

‘You got your passion for languages from her.’ Alana’s nails clink against her beer glass as she taps it to indicate a point made.

This isn’t true. Murasaki was a polyglot, yes, but an unwilling one. French, she refused to learn as a point of honour, which made walking around town with her a humiliation thirteen-year-old Hannibal was sure would eventually kill him. It did indeed drive him to learn French quickly and to learn it well. At marketplaces, at stores, at restaurants and council offices, he spoke for her and she stood silent to his side, perfectly bored. When he was still a child, they made for a pair so unlikely no one aspired to guess; when he grew into a young man, the insinuations started. She was a servant; an illegal worker; a lover. She never said anything to indicate otherwise, never made any attempt to shield them from the burn of it. But when he was eighteen and about to decide on universities, she sat him down in the kitchen and she told him,

‘If you are an immigrant, you’ll always have a good reason why you’re different. Do you understand? That is the first thing anyone will see about you, and everything else will be viewed through this lens. Achievement will be a surprise. Oddness and social failure will be expected. Do you understand?’

For what he has set out to achieve with Alana tonight, vulnerability will prove essential, so he considers sharing this memory. But it cuts too close to revealing something about himself Alana must never now.

Instead, he follows through with his original plan. In the study, he seats her in front of the blazing fireplace and plants himself closer than he would if they hadn’t been drinking. He unbuttons the collar of his shirt, as though to account for the warmth of the fire.

Her eyes linger on the exposed skin of his neck. It will be easier this way, he tells himself. When Will is gone, Hannibal is going to need someone to shield him from suspicion.

‘I’m concerned,’ she says suddenly, eyes drawn away to the fire, ‘and I want to ask, but I’m not sure how to ask without offending you, or at the very least forcing you to breach professional boundaries.’

Perfect. ‘If this about Will,’ Hannibal says with put-on caution, ‘then I would prefer to be asked and offended.’

Alana sighs. She dreads the conversation, but equally enjoys a little suffering for a cause.

‘He asked me to take the dogs for a while.’

‘I am aware.’

‘He doesn’t ask these things. You know? In all the time I’ve known him, he’s never asked me to look after them, even though I’ve told him a hundred times I wouldn’t mind, that I like dogs—I don’t know. I knew he’d been having hallucinations. That was concerning enough, but when I saw him last week—’ she breaks, thinks, slows. ‘He looks—he looks sick. He’s thinning. And the way he spoke to me—he missed three days of class, and I am told he never misses class unless it’s for a case.’

‘Or unless he is keeping vigil by Abigail Hobbs’ bedside.’

‘He asked me to recommend an attorney. I had a will written up a few years ago.’

This, finally, is new. ‘He did?’

‘He did.’

The inside of Hannibal’s mouth suddenly tastes bitter. *He* could have recommended an attorney. He has no immediate family, substantial funds, and he is Alana’s senior. Surely, he is the more obvious choice for such a request.

The bitterness must come through in his silence, because Alana has a ready explanation that she delivers like censure.

‘I am concerned he is trying to protect you.’

Warmth blooms on Hannibal’s neck. ‘Will is very protective.’

‘You are his therapist, Hannibal. You are the last person he should be trying to protect.’

She has warned him, so he supposes he can’t fault her the offense now. He thinks quickly of a thing to say. ‘I took him to hospital,’ he reveals, ‘and I’m afraid I showed more emotion that I should have when we were told they’d found nothing.’

‘Better than showing no emotion at all,’ Alana says softly. ‘Will has to be reminded there are people who care whether he lives or dies, even when he struggles to. Did you talk to him about committal?’

Hannibal shakes his head. ‘I fear that would kill him.’

‘Doing nothing is killing him, Hannibal.’

This is not the line of thinking he wants her to follow. It would be a miserable conclusion indeed if he let Will die to preserve his life here in Baltimore, only for it to come tumbling down when he is sued for malpractice.

‘I am well aware of my failures with regards to Will,’ he deflects, pulling himself straight and bringing his shoulders back. ‘I do not need them pointed out, Alana.’

The sofa creaks as she shifts her weight forward, drawing closer to him. ‘That’s not what I meant,’ she says. She is almost there, *almost*. ‘See, I told you I didn’t know how to do this without offending you.’

Hannibal meets her eye. Her breath smells like the beer he's brewed for her. 'Thank you for warning me,' he says.

Her head dips, her teeth flash in a smile. Hannibal catches her lips in a kiss. This, he knows, is the only real choice he will have to make tonight. After, he will only have to continue saying *yes.*

In the bedroom, he takes her dress off, folds it over the back of a chair, then stands patiently and waits to be undressed in turn. It is more difficult than usual to connect with the reality of it, to focus on the skin warming under his hands and on the mounting thrum in his stomach. Maybe because she is likely to smile at him in the morning and come back for more. Or maybe because if Hannibal were different, he imagines he might grow to love her.

He rests his head on her stomach for a while after, and she runs her fingers through his hair, and Hannibal cannot help but wonder what that would be like. But while there might be a facet of him that could love well, it is not one that would ever love wholly. He would be left with space in him, he knows, a space unlit and cold. Maybe this is a fact that others have simply chosen to accept; maybe they have less space in them.

Hannibal isn't others. He is himself, and that is all there is.

He makes crepes for breakfast and thick, spiced tea to go with them. It leaves a milky moustache over Alana's lip that he is supposed to kiss off. He does.

Then, she tells him she is not ready for a relationship.

'It almost feels like we're chess pieces,' she says, 'and the board is too busy as it is.'

'I understand.' The relief sags his shoulders.

'I'm sorry. I should have said something last night. I was trying on a role: an Alana Bloom who doesn't think too much. It was a poor performance.'

Hannibal's mouth quirks. 'Hurtful,' he chides. 'But thank you for your feedback.'

She laughs, uncomfortable but grateful.

'Can we agree to leave this be, for now?' She is adjusting her dress already, eager to leave behind this new tension.

'We are agreed.'

The minute the door clicks shut behind her, Hannibal goes into the kitchen to find his phone.

I have to cancel our session next Tuesday 12/9.

Hannibal reads it once, then again, as if through doing so he hopes to discover there is more to Will's message than he first thought.

Will has never done this before. Yes, he has cancelled, usually because he was being called away on a case, but never without explanation, and never so far in advance. It is only Saturday. Hannibal suspects Will isn't sure whether he'll live to see morning, never mind what he'll be doing on Tuesday night.

The phone is already ringing, pressed up tight against his ear. One tone, another. At last, a metallic voice recites a generic dismissal. Hannibal hangs up, then redials. Nothing, again.

It can't be. It's too early.

He was supposed to have more time.

What little snow fell last night has melted, and the roads are flush with puddles of salt and dirt. Hannibal flicks through every station that has signal, but they all annoy him, so instead he drives the hour in silence, percussed by the throb of the heart that echoes through his skull.

He despises the sight of Wolf Trap when it emerges from behind the last line of trees. He doesn't want to be here; he knows what it means.

The door to the house stands ajar. A trail of muddy footprints leads up the porch steps and over the threshold. Winston is nosing at a dead bird that lies prone across the boards. He looks up at the sound of the engine and gives a single bark, but then seems to recognize Hannibal and decide he's not worth interrupting his meal.

Hannibal pushes the door open with the tip of his shoe. He braces himself for what he knows he will find: a still body in a bed of sweat and vomit, the stench of decay, the end.

But the bed is empty.

There is a trail of mud on the floor.

In the nook, an overturned armchair. A shattered glass. A speck of blood. The usual smell of illness pervades it all, every thread and fibre, so heady that Hannibal's head begins to throb.

Without the dogs, the house is eerie. The lone sound of Hannibal's breath strikes perverse.

Wood creaks.

Hannibal's head whips to the stairway, which reveals finally Will: pale and caked in mud, his fingers purple.

'You have to go,' he whispers. He doesn't move from the landing, but his eyes cut to the left, toward the study and the kitchen. 'You have to go before he sees you.'

Hannibal puts a foot on the first step up. It creaks. Will winces.

There is a sound from the depth of the house.

It's probably nothing. A squirrel, a gust of wind, Winston dragging his prey around to the back porch. But that is clearly not what Will is thinking: his eyes widen, his breath catches,

and then he's beckoning Hannibal over with trembling hands.

The moment he's close enough, Will grabs him by the elbow and pulls him to the upper floor and then into the bathroom, sweet with the smell of fresh sick.

The lock on the door clicks. Will lowers himself to sit with his back against it, eyes unseeing.

The bathroom is long and spacious, with a chair in the corner buried under towels and laundry. Hannibal sits on the tile instead, as close to Will as he can make it without spooking him.

Will is clutching one hand in the other so hard, it is like he's trying to pull it out of the joint. His fingernails are black with dirt.

'Will.'

'He took the gun.'

'Who took the gun, Will?'

'Will,' he echoes in a murmur.

Hannibal can't help himself: he smiles. 'Will,' he hums agreeably, but that only seems to agitate Will more.

'No, the *other* Will,' he keens. 'The other Will.'

'The other Will took the gun?'

A nod. He makes visible effort to slow his breaths, to still his shaking enough to speak clearly. 'Last night, I went into the forest,' he whispers. 'I had to. It was like it was calling me, like it wanted nothing else. And I locked Winston away and I took my gun and I went. I thought maybe I'd find the animal again, the one that was wounded, but I think—I think I might have found *it* instead.'

'The thing in the woods?'

'I don't know. I don't know! Maybe just the bigger fish. Maybe there's a fish bigger than that, maybe if I went even deeper, I'd have found that, but I went as far as I could—I kept going until the ground under my feet froze over. It was this place I'd never been before, it was—this stretch where every branch is just snow, thick caps on every stone, and the streams were frozen through. That's where he lives. He's—he looked just like me, or maybe a little shorter, or maybe he stands different, or there's something, something about his mouth, his expression—his eyes were like wells. If you drop in a coin, it'll never make a sound, that kind of—'

He chokes on a dry sob. Hannibal should be trying to calm him, but he wants to hear this through.

‘God, when he looked at me,’ Will says it like he’s sharing a precious secret; Hannibal has to lean in closer to hear. ‘When he looked at me, I knew that was all he wanted. He wanted to swallow me whole. And he could. He said that if I ran, he would catch me, how easy it would be, because he hunts—he hunts rabbits, and deer and wolves, and *bears*, and these huge trout that he catches and then eats right from his hands as they flap and strain, I *saw it*. He wore a bearskin across his shoulders, but he left it there in the woods. It’s forever winter where he lives, so anywhere else he’ll be plenty warm, he said. He told me—he told me if I bring him here, if I show him the way out of the woods, then he’ll let me live. That’s the deal.’

Hannibal manages to untangle one of Will’s hands from the other. Will clutches his wrist instead. His fingers are frozen stiff: it is likely he has indeed been to the forest, and for a long time, too.

‘You made a deal,’ Hannibal repeats gently. ‘And you brought him here?’

‘He’s in the kitchen.’ Will’s nails dig into Hannibal’s skin like claws. ‘He’s hungry. But he can’t see you, do you understand? Listen to me, he can’t see you. I made the bargain, but it’s only for me. I don’t know what he’ll want from you.’

‘There is no one here but you and me, Will,’ Hannibal tries. ‘Winston is making some noise downstairs, that is all. You’re the only Will Graham here.’

‘No, no—’

‘Yes. But I will go and make sure just in case.’

‘No, you can’t go—you didn’t see what he did to that animal—’

‘I will be fine,’ Hannibal promises. ‘I will be very careful.’

It takes a moment of gymnastics, but he finally extracts himself from Will’s hold. His heart pounds as he walks down the stairs, even though he knows what he will find, and that it will be nothing at all.

Before he takes the left turn deeper into the house, he takes off his shoes. He should feel ridiculous, but Wolf Trap rises to the occasion: with its light, with its quiet, at once the impossible feels just left side of familiar.

The door to the back porch stands wide open. He does his best to ignore it and pushes forth.

Light streams through the large windows at the back of the house. The kitchen stands empty.

Ever so slightly, Hannibal relaxes.

Mud has been trailed in here too, and it litters the wooden boards of the floor. Brushes of dirt mark the cupboards. A pile of dirty dishes lies abandoned to the side of the sink, just like the week previous; but now, a pot with scrambled eggs and bacon sits cooling on the counter. When Hannibal puts his hand above the hob, he finds it still warm.

A thud cuts through the house like lightning.

Hannibal doesn't think about it. He grabs the sturdiest knife from the block and stalks back, expecting fully, this time, only the unexpected—and yet it's a different kind of shock when all he finds is Will, his Will and no other, lying flat on the stairway landing, limbs jerking violently to a frantic rhythm Hannibal cannot hear.

He runs up the stairs and kneels. Will's face is a canvas of greys and blues, his eyes rolled to the back of his head so only the whites are visible. The saliva at his mouth is stained red.

Hannibal rolls him to the side, because while there is nothing much he can do, he will not allow Will Graham to die choking on his own spit.

Then, he walks back down the stairs. He replaces the knife in the block. Winston is frantic, running back and forth between Will's prone distress and Hannibal's impassivity, his barks a grating cacophony of frequencies.

It is unfortunate Hannibal is here to see it, but it is perfect timing otherwise. The state of the house is a testament to mental illness. Epilepsy remains a mysterious sphere for the average physician, so it is unlikely the post-mortem will be paid much mind. Should anyone suspect an underlying disease, Alana, run fevered with guilt for callously using Hannibal on the very night that proved Will's last, will stand beside him whatever accusations might come his way. And, understandably traumatized by the experience, Doctor Hannibal Lecter will distance himself from the relationships he has formed within the Bureau. When he kills again, no one at the scene will be able to see in it anything at all that matters.

This is sudden, but it was always going to be sudden. The one element of surprise is how easy it is in the end: he must only walk out of the house, pull the door shut, drive away.

Will's limbs are driving themselves against the wooden floor. It's been a good while now and he is showing no signs of stopping. Hannibal can't see him from where he stands in the kitchen, but he can hear the sounds of him, the thump of knees and elbows, the gurgling half-moans. They do not make for a pleasant listening, so he forces his feet to move again. He steps back into his shoes, he goes outside and he shuts the door. But then instead of heading for the car, he lowers himself to sit on the porch steps, in among the mud.

The porch is fenced, and the post to his side is peeling white paint. There is a thing hung off it that Hannibal hasn't noticed before: on a piece of leather string rests a large tusk, yellowed and pointed.

He unhooks it from the post and pulls it down to lay in his palm. It is nowhere near as large as the pointy tooth of the shark in the Smithsonian, but at the length of Hannibal's thumb it is still imposing. He's not sure what animal it might have belonged to. A bear, maybe.

What a strange thing for Will to own. He is not a hunter, and Hannibal has never seen him wear a pendant. Stranger even that it was left out here—Hannibal almost feels as though it was meant for him to find. As though this Other Will, this hunter of trout and bears from a frosted land, had left it here for Hannibal alone. It is a sense he cannot support with anything meaningful, beyond that it is lodged in his chest and won't budge.

The tooth of a predator. A hunter’s trophy. A hallucination made palpable, right here in his palm.

A story realized.

Hannibal calls 911.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, Hannibal investigates his pendant and deals (?) with the fallout of his recent choices. Also, some old friends make an appearance.

Thank you to everyone reading. I promise it won't be all depressive going forward ;)

The Gift

Chapter Summary

Hannibal investigates the pendant, Will's final case, and the matter of how to put this all behind him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Five: The Gift

The drive down to Washington is twice as long without Will.

He hesitated when he first discovered Randall was now working at the Smithsonian: the point of the excursion was to *not* think about Will, but then perhaps it would allow him to recontextualise. Will Graham didn't own the Smithsonian, or Washington D.C., or even the pendant heavy in the pocket of his coat, because this other, hypothetical Will had left it for *Hannibal* to find, before dissipating into a fog from which he would not return.

The security guard leads him to the receptionist, and the receptionist places a call, and then Hannibal is directed to a closet-like space at the end of a long corridor that smells of bleach. He finds Randall bent over paperwork, a twitch in his left hand that once indicated to Hannibal he was approaching a breaking point. He used to enjoy pushing Randall past his breaking points. What each of his useless physicians and therapists had perceived a weakness, Hannibal saw for the root of future glory, and whenever he was able to weave his way past the boy's insecurities to draw that glory into his shining eyes, Hannibal felt *godly.*

Years have passed, and Randall is no longer a boy: his jaw has sharpened, his brow has thickened. But still, his shoulders tense just the same, and the sound of his hard swallow as he forces himself to look up to Hannibal's chin is a familiar tune.

'Doctor Lecter,' he says, a whistle to his voice that Hannibal enjoys. 'Long time.'

'Indeed. It's a pleasure to see you again, Randall.'

Randall beckons him inside the tight room. Dust swivels upward into the dim when Hannibal leans against the unoccupied desk. He hasn't been invited to sit.

Randall shuts the door. He turns the key.

'Oh,' Hannibal comments.

Randall gives a one-shouldered shrug. He is tense as a spring pulled past limit. Hannibal wonders briefly what Randall suspects the purpose of his visit might be, before he dismisses it as unimportant. He was once deeply enamoured with untangling the hanks of Randall's expectations; now, he finds relief in disinterest.

'I was glad to hear you've secured a position here,' he praises gently. 'It was a dream of yours, wasn't it? To try on the curator's hat?'

'Who told you I worked here?'

A little taken aback, Hannibal taps the desk a few times with a knuckle, searching for a quick way to allay the mount of Randall's anxiety. He has fallen out of practice. 'I admit to having resorted to Google,' he reveals finally. 'You've been on my mind lately and when I came across a question that I thought you might help me answer, it was only a convenient catalyst for orchestrating a reunion.'

'Why was I on your mind?'

Hannibal finds himself impressed. He didn't expect much from this meeting: it was only meant as a reminder that there have been others deserving of his interest in the past, and that there will inevitably be others in the future.

'A patient of mine was struggling with telling fact apart from delusion,' he says, 'and it was reminiscent of some of our discussions.'

Randall gives a terse nod. 'How are they? The patient?'

'Not well. He recently suffered a generalised seizure and is currently comatose. He's been diagnosed with encephalitis.'

'What's that?'

'A type of brain inflammation. If he wakes, he is likely to be brain damaged. As you can imagine, the situation is quite grim.' Hannibal gives him a smile. 'It makes me all the happier to see you doing so well.'

He is not sure he means it as a threat, but Randall certainly reads it as such.

'What's your question?' he mutters.

Hannibal produces the tusk from his coat pocket. It dangles on its string for a moment before Randall catches it mid-phase and pulls it out of his grasp, like he doesn't want Hannibal touching it.

'What's this?'

'I was hoping you could tell me that. I received it as a gift from a patient, but I confess to not knowing the origin.'

Randall relaxes minutely as he examines the tooth with deft fingers: this is his territory. ‘It’s genuine,’ he decides. ‘A—a bear, I think. I’d say a brown, from the size.’

A shiver of satisfaction travels down Hannibal’s back. What would a brown bear’s tusk be doing hanging off the porch in Wolf Trap? No answers immediately present, and the one person perhaps able to explain is gone—what a delicious mystery Hannibal has inherited.

‘Thank you, Randall,’ he says sincerely.

He reaches to take the tooth back, but Randall doesn’t relinquish it. His mouth twists downward as though he is swallowing something vile.

‘It’s protection,’ he says. ‘A bear tooth protects the person who wears it.’

Hannibal tugs at the string until the tusk slips from Randall’s fingers.

‘Then I am glad to have been granted such a gift,’ he says.

From then on, the pendant feels warm against his chest. The temperature has picked up and rain now sheets from the gloomy skies, weighing the air down with a wet chill that sneaks through threads of clothing and lodges deep in the bone. Hannibal doesn’t eat out often, but he is suddenly starved, and the prospect of driving back up to Baltimore on an empty stomach, through deluge and the inevitable traffic, strikes him as unbearable. He makes a detour to Café Descartes instead.

Mrs Komeda and her silent husband have brought Hannibal along once, and he remembers the occasion fondly. But today, everything from the white table sheets to the forced continental twist annoys him. He orders black cod, which is fine. The dressing is interesting enough to make him pause as he tries and fails to identify the source of the flavour. He considers asking; he considers eating around it, but understands how ridiculous such a thing would look, and it isn’t as though anything can be *wrong* with a dressing that tastes perfectly pleasant.

He takes his phone out for distraction and navigates to gallery. It is unspeakably rude, but it is better than refusing to eat the dressing.

The pictures that interest him are from Saturday: the day Will collapsed. Once he had been tucked into a hospital bed and connected to his whistling machines, Hannibal left him be and drove back to Wolf Trap: someone had to feed Winston before Alana could come pick him up, and it irked Hannibal to think Will might die and leave behind him a pile of unwashed dishes.

He did the dishes, he mopped the floor, he set straight the overturned chair. Will had fouled himself shortly before the ambulance arrived; Winston had got into the mess and dragged it all over the house. Hannibal wrestled him into the bath, which cost him one of his favourite shirts, he disinfected half the lower floor, and finally sagged into the chair by Will’s desk, where he found a spread of photographs and files on the Washington D.C. murders.

They peer back at him now from the phone screen. Will would never catch this killer and Hannibal could not help but be glad for it. Yes, he will have spent his last days of lucidity pouring over a tableau Hannibal hadn't crafted, but at least he will have failed.

He'd got close though. The photograph that matters had been placed in the centre: it's an office Christmas party and young Edward Tussey in a Santa hat is chatting with a girl around his age, pulled sharp into a boring dress off the rack. In a knot of spectators at the opposite edge of the frame stands the antagonist, suit untailored but in glistening quality fabric, face dull and inoffensive, a too-large watch on his wrist. A man with substantial funds but no real notion of how best to use them, and so plain that unless you know what to look for, you'll miss the tangle of desperation sat behind his eyes. They are tied to Edward, his eyes, and his lips are hinting at an upward inclination, like a smile that changed its mind halfway through; perhaps when he realized Edward couldn't—or wouldn't—see him.

Edward worked for a large firm. Will wouldn't have had the time to match a name to the face, but any reasonably competent agent would be able to take it from here. Well, Hannibal will slow them down as much as he is able. He has removed the photographs from Will's desk, and he has not told Jack. If Will doesn't catch this killer, then Hannibal would prefer it if no one did.

After the meal, he drives home up roads he can barely see. There's an uneasy feeling in his stomach. He is still failing to identify the mysterious ingredient in the dressing. The last half-hour of the journey, he spends disparaging himself for not asking, though he is not convinced he would have trusted the waiter to know for sure.

At home, he takes the bear tooth out of his coat and slides it into his shirt pocket. It takes a good while to arrange it so that while it still bugles the fabric, it does so in a way that won't drive him insane.

He tries to compose again, but all he sees when he tries to think of Will is the smell of it, the blood seeping into his saliva, the white of his eyes. Unfortunate that he was there to see it, and unnecessary: it might have been a mercy to let Will die when he was meant to.

Before he gets ready for bed, Hannibal leans over the toilet bowl. He is sick until all the Café Descartes food has been flushed down the toilet, dressing included.

His phone rings as he's sitting on the cold tile, working to calm the tremor in his hands.

'Hello,' he croaks.

'He woke up,' Alana says.

Hannibal sits straighter. A wave of nausea rushes up his body, and he has to press his lips together to keep down the flush of acid. 'How is he?' he manages.

'It's hard to tell. He's confused. He didn't seem to recognize me or—or anyone or any*thing*, really, but it's impossible to say if that's just the waking up or—' He hears her swallow against tears. 'He's not talking,' she adds in a whisper. 'Like he's forgotten how. The doctor said it might be temporary. Or not. This thing, I think they're leaning heavily toward

autoimmune encephalitis, it might have damaged—they've got him on steroids and they're hoping once the swelling clears up, we'll be able to better tell how he's really doing.'

'I see.'

A beat of silence. Then,

'Would you come by the hospital tomorrow?'

Hannibal should find better words for it, but he cannot.

'No.'

'No,' she repeats.

There is silence again. He can hear her breath, crackling and soft over the line. He wipes at his mouth, where the phantom taste of vomit lingers on his bottom lip.

'I understand,' Alana says, but how could she? 'I'll keep you updated on anything major. Take care of yourself, alright?'

'Yes, of course.'

The following afternoon, he goes to see Dr Du Maurier. He brings the bear tusk along, concealed in the lining of his jacket, though he has no intention of making her privy to this particular part of the story.

For a while, she only listens, blank in her silence. When he is done recounting the events of the week previous, she lets him hang on the quiet before she speaks.

'Whatever the extent of the damage he has suffered, the relationship you had with Will Graham is gone. It is natural to feel grief.'

'I've been aware for a long time that my relationship with Will must end. I thought I was better prepared for it.'

'Loss is always unexpected, Hannibal,' she says softly. 'No matter how much we make ourselves expect it.'

Hannibal gives a nod.

'I am aware that I need to move on from this experience.' He looks out the window: it's a mild day and, thankfully, there is no snow. 'But I am struggling to do so.'

Bedelia considers him. 'This might be the end of the relationship you've had with Will Graham, but it isn't the end of Will Graham. Despite all odds, Will Graham lives.'

'A man lives,' Hannibal corrects. 'That man is not Will Graham.'

‘Then seeing that with your own eyes might provide a sense of closure. Although from what I understand of brain damage, a chance at recovery does exist.’

Hannibal shakes his head. It does not sound to him as though Will could shake off the last few months and walking off unchanged—and if he *were* to ever claw his way back to himself, it would be essential that Hannibal fade from his memory well enough by then to be sheltered from scrutiny. Anything less, and he will be forced to go through this ordeal again.

‘Will is not good for me,’ he states firmly. ‘Any relationship with him is untenable, and I have no interest in the pain that will inevitably result from seeing him hollow.’

Bedelia regards him. He meets her eye easily, translating into his gaze the confidence that has risen in him.

‘Then allow yourself to acknowledge what you’re leaving behind. And allow yourself to grieve that loss, Hannibal. Take time to experience it, to submerge yourself in the feeling, or it will fester.’

She is, as often, exactly right, and Hannibal knows immediately what he must do.

Back at home, he spends more than three hours perusing Will’s files, until eventually he discovers the identity of the man in the photograph. John Kelney: what a preposterously mundane name. He will be so much better employed in death than he could ever be in life.

By then, an early dusk has covered the street with the thick blanket of night. The headlights of Hannibal’s Bentley pierce it like needles trailing golden thread. He is used to taking his time to plan and plot, but it is essential he get to Kelney before the FBI do, and he wants this over. The bear tooth in his pocket is still warm. Hannibal does not worry.

John Kelney lives alone and he dines alone, in a subpar, overpriced establishment Hannibal intends to review poorly later. He takes him from the parking lot and lets him drift half-consciously in the passenger seat, paralysed and eager for suggestion.

‘I think you might have had too much to drink, Mr Kelney,’ he jibes with a smile. Kelney hums.

Whatever connection he might have sought, Hannibal does not think John Kelney deserved. He looks and reacts flat, shallow, and Hannibal refuses to believe he is capable of the sort of love that matters.

‘I shared in your ambition, once,’ he tells him, though Kelney’s head is lolling freely with the car’s motion, and it is unlikely he hears him. ‘I was eager to fall in love and I did, often—but unlike you, I aimed higher than that, Mr Kelney. I wanted connection without incorporation. I wanted a unity that wouldn’t force me to swallow the other into myself.’

An odd, guttural hum escapes Kelney’s lips. He is salivating profusely, dripping over Hannibal’s upholstery. Hannibal reaches over and dries him up with a tissue, eyes on the road.

‘But one by one, the people I met faded as I took on their colours. I doubt you’ve done much of that, hm? It might have done you some good. Eventually, I grew to accept that this was the sort of love I could have: a search for what I lacked so I might bring it to light, bask in it, steal away the memory for myself, and then go on.’

Perhaps what he is feeling now isn’t so much grief as it is *disappointment.*

He lays the body of John Kelney in the Butterfly Pavilion at the Smithsonian. He slices open his stomach and pulls out all he can easily reach: the guts, the kidneys, the liver. Unlike John Kelney, he is never wasteful, so he puts it all in an icebox to take back home with him. He drills open the skull and pulls out the brain, grey and fast-cooling. With a wide brush, he paints Kelney’s skin with sugar water. Even as he works, the first butterflies come to sample the feast, and cover the body in colourful flutters of blooming life.

Before he leaves, he takes out two of the panels on each side of the opening in the pavilion wall. The night ensures he will not be able to admire the final effect with his own eyes, but as soon as dawn breaks, light will blast through the windows and bathe the emptied carcass in a golden glow.

He gets home just short of six in the morning and sits immediately at the harpsichord. As he plays, he thinks of Will on the stairway landing, horrible and violent in death. He thinks of the body swimming with butterflies that Will won’t ever see. He thinks, too, of the woods around the castle where he spent the first years of his life, and how he and Misha used to play in the long winters. In their imagined kingdom of eternal snow, the frost never melted. Wolves, bears and monsters stalked from behind the bushes and leapt out at careless children passing through. They would eat them whole every time, unless, of course, the children remembered to bring along their stick swords.

Hours come and go. Melodies run him ragged and red-eyed, and the skin on his cheeks grows tight with crystalized salt. For an early breakfast, he eats John Kelney’s kidney medium-rare, and then, full, warm and exhausted, he heads upstairs to catch a few hours of missed sleep.

Just as he is finishing changing into pyjamas, his phone buzzes with a text message.

Will is speaking.

Hannibal sees it, and reads it, and he doesn’t feel sick. He feels nothing, in fact, expect sleepy, because whatever threat and whatever opportunity Will Graham had been to him, he is gone. Hannibal has written him his melody, and he has painted him his tribute, and he will not spend the rest of his life telling himself stories that will never be true.

Chapter End Notes

I'm taking bets on how long Hannibal will actually manage to stay away. (hint: it's Hannibal we're talking about).

Thank you for reading!

The Warrior

Chapter Summary

Hannibal pays a hospital visit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six: The Warrior

Whenever a particularly interesting patient comes Hannibal's way, a delicate balance must be preserved. Yes, he wishes to help and to guide, and he wishes to see first-hand as much of their transformation as he is able, but he must first and foremost protect himself and his reputation. It is a balance he failed to negotiate with Randall, which resulted in having to cut him loose; it is one he is dangerously close to tipping with Abigail, and so soon after he has barely escaped the cut of the shatter that was Will.

The risks and the rewards of this balance are intoxicating.

'I think I might have DID. You know—Dissociative Identity Disorder.'

'I am aware of what DID stands for, Franklyn.'

Franklyn is *not* a particularly interesting patient.

'I've been reading about it.' Franklyn leans forward in his chair. Any more and he risks falling off. 'I mean, all of it is exactly what I've been telling you about. The derealization, right? Like nothing is real anymore. And the other one—de-per-so-nalization. And my memory's been—'

'Derealization, depersonalization and forgetfulness are all symptoms of dissociative disorders,' Hannibal agrees. 'They are also symptoms of anxiety.'

'But—'

'Which happens to be the one thing we have successfully diagnosed you with thus far, Franklyn. Hypochondria, of course, is also common in patients suffering from an anxiety disorder.'

Franklyn huffs. He looks as though he'd like to cross his arms over his chest but recognizes the gesture would be childish.

'Why is the idea of having an anxiety disorder so unpalatable to you, Franklyn?'

‘No one *wants* to have an anxiety disorder.’

‘No. But most would prefer it to a disorder as serious as DID.’

Franklyn stays silent. Hannibal considers him.

‘Some patients do not believe that an anxiety diagnosis validates their experiences. We are often told anxiety, like stress, is a fact of life that we as adults should be able to contend with.’

‘No, that’s not—’ Franklyn looks away. ‘You’re going to think this is stupid. But I feel like—I think I feel like if there’s something really wrong with me, something more serious and less common, then—then I’d be worth more of your time.’

‘I don’t find that stupid at all,’ Hannibal says.

‘You don’t?’

No. In fact, Hannibal finds that just a little *interesting*.

It isn’t much, of course, but he has been yearning for any sort of mental stimulation these days; they stretch, half-empty, and turn too soon into long nights that refuse him sleep. Franklyn’s tales of the world never seeming quite real are generic and nowhere near as poignant as he imagines them in the telling. But in this liminal time of not-yet-winter, when little captures his attention and mornings come too late and too bleak, these tales strike him as strangely soothing. Franklyn’s aspiration to be more, too, though bound to failure, is welcome today.

‘We all want to be seen as special by others.’ He gifts Franklyn the smile that he’s wanted so desperately. ‘If no one sees us this way, we risk losing ourselves in the crowd. But suffering isn’t the only way we can prove distinction, Franklyn.’

Franklyn’s brows furrow. ‘Shouldn’t you be telling me I don’t need to prove myself to other people? That what I need is confidence in myself and all that?’

Hannibal angles his head to regard him fully, staring Franklyn down without blinking until his gaze has first shied away, then returned to tentatively meet Hannibal’s. ‘Should I?’ he asks idly. He throws an overt look at his watch, affecting displeasure. ‘Perhaps next time.’

Once Franklyn has left, Hannibal checks his phone. He has missed a call from Abigail. A few weeks ago, he might have been pleased at a chance to speak with her—Abigail is certainly more interesting than Franklyn, and the balance there is forever precarious—but today, he thinks he knows what this might be about, and he’d rather not hear it.

Still, he calls back. She answers immediately.

‘Abigail. I apologize for not picking up earlier, I was with a patient.’

‘I figured. Can you do something for me?’

‘I would think we’ve long established that,’ he chides, amused. ‘What did you need?’

‘For you to come drive me.’

‘Of course.’

‘To the hospital.’

Hannibal pauses. He allows his eyes to drift shut for the length of a breath. ‘Did you manage to change Doctor Bloom’s mind?’

‘I’m not asking Doctor Bloom to drive me, I’m asking you.’

Her tone is combative. This is shaping up to be a long conversation. ‘I am sure Doctor Bloom has good reason to advise against this visit. I am sorry, Abigail, but I cannot go against your therapist’s recommendation.’

She laughs, all acid. ‘Since *when*? She thinks I’m going to be traumatized. That seeing someone who’s in hospital sick is going to traumatize me.’

‘Neither of us have seen him. We have no way of judging his physical or mental state. If Alana believes it would be a difficult experience for you, I am sure she has grounds for it.’

‘Well, I’m already traumatized. One more or one less isn’t going to make much of a difference, is it?’

Hannibal doesn’t genuinely think visiting Will is going to traumatize her. If anything, it would be good for her to see him so broken—she has been afraid of him since their first encounter, and to see a man she’d once considered a threat made so vulnerable might aid her confidence. The only reason she is advocating for herself so stubbornly now is that she recognizes as much too—but doesn’t wish to offend Hannibal by putting it into words.

He is already on thin ice with Alana, whose disappointment in him is a gentle thing full of compassion that might nevertheless grow teeth—but the risk of crossing Alana isn’t the real issue here. Will has been awake for eleven days now and Hannibal has successfully avoided seeing him thus far. He will not allow Abigail to ruin it for him.

‘Fine. I won’t bother asking again.’

The line clicks. Hannibal stares at the phone for a beat, torn between anger and amusement, and settles finally on feeling neither.

He pockets the phone, he straightens the armchair shoved out of alignment by Franklyn’s fidgeting, he spares a thought for the relentlessly depressing skies, and he packs up for the day.

At home, he settles himself in the study. Under the low light of the desk lamp, he sits and draws all evening, every stroke of pencil gentling the upset that raised its head at Abigail’s insistence. He is very pleased with the sketch of Franklyn that results: the yearning in his eyes, the shape of his mouth curling around nothing, the world around him a haze of rainy

impressions that fail to affect him as much as he'd like. Many of Hannibal's sketches are exercises in form that end up kindling for colder nights, but he preserves his favourites in albums he keeps in the study, and when he deems Franklyn's portrait worthy he takes these out to find a page for it—and then he sinks.

The albums litter the coffee table, the sofa, the rug. Hannibal flips through page after page, in turns admiring and critical, every image a memory he need only tug on to unspool. The room is growing cold. It's seeping through his jacket. He could turn up the heating or he could build a fire, but he does not feel like going to all the trouble just for himself.

It's nearing eight when he finds it. It isn't as though he'd been looking for it, but when his fingers brush the grain of the yellowed paper, it feels as though he had been doing exactly that.

The man in the drawing stands with his back to Hannibal, the sharp line of his jaw peeking from behind the tangle of hair. His chest is bare, the nakedness a strange contrast to the snow that droops the branches of the framing trees. Before him, the bear stands on its hind legs, teeth out. The fat and fur curl over its joints just a little wrong, affording it an immediate uncanniness—Hannibal doesn't draw animals often, and this sketch was done many years ago, before he solidified his technique.

The inspiration for the scene set here in pencil is older still, so much so that he struggles to pin down the facts of the matter. His recollection is of the thoughts running through his head as he drew the picture, not as he lived the experience, and so it is already filtered through the sieves of adulthood. But he'd been very young when he went into the forest alone—Mischa was ill, maybe, or moody, or busy with some other play, and unencumbered by her smaller feet he ventured deeper into the snow kingdom than ever before.

There he found a shrub of holly. He remembers the glint of the red fruit, the immediate answer of want deep in his body that sent him scaling the tree. Winters were hard, always, and fresh produce limited; they made it through thanks to the jars of pickled vegetables that lined basement walls, but Hannibal was a picky eater then and found them much too sour. Every winter, he'd grow tired just a little sooner than he'd like, and he'd come back from play painted with bruises; when he brushed his teeth, his gums would colour red and he'd chase Mischa around the house, flashing at her this smile of blood until she squealed at him to stop. He didn't realize it was scurvy, of course, and never thought much about it. He knew that soon, apricots and radishes would return to their table, and his gums would stop their bleed.

But then it was still winter. Once he'd seen the red of the holly, full of juice and the promise of sugar, there was nothing for it: he stuffed himself full of the poisonous berries, and the play-pretend shifted closer to what real felt like.

He remembers how his breath stuck in his lungs when he trembled before the mountain of dark fur and yellow teeth. He remembers when a warrior, savage and naked, came and killed the bear, saving Hannibal from the crush of its jaws. He remembers that on his way back home he stumbled and threw up over himself, again and again.

He's not confident whether he hallucinated the bear and the warrior or actively imagined them; it makes little difference. As often happens with childhood memories, the line between impression and truth has wasted away, and no tags exist to distinguish the real from the fantastical.

The warrior in the drawing has his face shielded from Hannibal's view, but it matters little: Hannibal recognizes him immediately. Once he holds the name in his head, it is too late to convince himself he is wrong.

His heart beats hard in his throat. It seems that even now, he is unable to distinguish the real from the fantastical. He'd thought that Will hallucinating a savage twin in his final moments was a by-product of Hannibal's talk of shadows and repressed selves, or perhaps a way for Will's brain to conceptualise his disease—anti-NMDAR encephalitis is an autoimmune condition, Will's mind is under siege from the body which has deemed him alien. Perhaps to this Other Will, Will himself was the *Other*, with an otherness that had to be expunged.

But now, Hannibal is staring at his own decades-old depiction of the Other Will, at the sharp juts of his shoulders, his exposed neck, the knife in his hand—and he carries the bear's tooth in his pocket and the responsibility for this creation in his chest. Has the Other Will ever been Will's hallucination, or only Hannibal's? Is it possible that he appeared, independently, out of the knots and snags of Hannibal's fantasy, and stalked Will down to tear him open and leave him empty?

The man in the picture could be any man: Hannibal knows this. He is faceless and expressionless, and yes, the hair is Will's, but Hannibal spent his youth staunchly copying every stroke of every master, and a head of dark curls is hardly an innovation. He knows this.

He is struck suddenly by the conviction that were he to go to the hospital, he would find Will's bed empty. That the Other Will isn't the only Will that Hannibal has imagined.

He carefully replaces the drawing in the album.

He calls Abigail to tell her she is to get dressed.

The roads are emptying out now, but the night is still bright with the red of backlights and the glare of Abigail's phone screen. Hannibal's eyes flick to it from time to time despite his best efforts, drawn like a moth to a light.

'Take a right here,' she directs. Her forehead is pressed up against the cold windowpane. Her breath gathers in condensation on her scarf, pushed up to her nose. There is rain in the air.

Hannibal takes the turn. They are stopping to pick up a card; Abigail insisted that they not come empty-handed. He supposes it is only polite. He would perhaps care more about such things if he weren't concerned that Will might never have been there at all.

He signs his name next to Abigail's, the card pressed up on the hood of his car. The warmth of the engine seeps into his palm. He pushes the cap back onto the pen, and then they are each going to their door, wrenching handles, buckling buckles, swift and quiet. There is a fevered urgency to the night, though what it is they are rushing for escapes Hannibal: visiting

hours are long over and will not be made less so by their haste. He is unsure how they will secure admission. He knows that they *must.*

The nurse on call eyes them appraisingly, then tells them to get out and come back tomorrow. Hannibal puts on a smile but it doesn't matter because Abigail's eyes glaze over as she clutches her backpack close to her chest, and pushes a hitch into her voice to entreat,

'*Please.*'

It is a better lie for never being told. The nurse looks and sees immediately the young daughter rushing across half the country to see dad right after exams finished. Hannibal isn't sure how he himself fits into the tale, but it seems that sympathy for the child is enough, because the nurse hesitates, and then they're in.

There exists another possibility, Hannibal thinks now, and it echoes in his skull: Will might indeed be there, but whatever is left of him might not know who *Hannibal* is.

Will's room is to the end of the corridor. It's set in amber by a nightlight at the side of the bed. In this light, the white of the sheets does not hurt the eyes, and the silvery screens of the patient monitors fade into the background. Through the window, the hospital campus stretches in flickers of red, blue and yellow, until the lights of the motorway cut it off at a sharp angle.

The bed isn't empty.

The man looks up a split second before Hannibal pushes the door open, and their eyes meet through the glass pane.

This man in the hospital room has the blue of Will's eyes, but without any of the depth. Lined yellow and purple, they sink into his cheeks, giving him the appearance of a corpse freshly dug from wet earth. He is thinner than Will, a sack of skin over a bed of bone, and if it weren't for the pillows propping him up Hannibal imagines he would have toppled off the side of the mattress. His hair falls in strands stuck together with sweat. His lips are scarred with protrusions and dried blood.

Hannibal loses track of each and every thought: and he forgets the drawing, the bear, the past two weeks.

The man's eyes follow them cautiously as they drag over chairs, divest themselves of coats, sit. It is as though he thinks them predators, come to sniff at a wounded beast.

'Hello, Will,' Hannibal says gently. 'Do you remember who I am?'

'I remember.'

But his eyes are swimming with confusion. His Adam's apple bobs painfully, like he's swallowing down something bulging and awful.

'My name is Doctor Hannibal Lecter.'

‘No.’

His voice comes out so rough, Hannibal wonders if it hurts him to be speaking at all.

‘I am very certain it is,’ he counters politely. Then, because he suspects neither Will nor Abigail would enjoy it if she had to introduce herself too, he adds, ‘Abigail and I have brought you a card.’

Abigail extends it. With that same impassive expression, Will reaches out with his right hand, fingers shaking minutely. It takes him a moment before he manages to secure a grip on the edge and place the card into his lap.

The picture in front is of a dog dressed in a doctor’s white coat. Will examines it with such focus, one might have thought it was a Bosch.

His nails scratch against the edge of the card as he eases it open. He stares at the inner page in silence, eyebrows knit in increasing agitation.

He throws it back at Abigail.

‘Read it?’

Abigail nods. Her face is parchment white.

‘Dear Will,’ she reads, enunciating clearly. ‘As they say in obedience school—heal.’

Silence. Abigail sits stewing in regret for ever having made the purchase. When Hannibal meets Will’s eye, he finds him deeply puzzled; he has to look down into his lap to hold in the smile.

‘That—was a joke.’ Abigail chuckles awkwardly. Will is watching her, and at the first sign of amusement he mirrors it, the corners of his lips driven upward in an easy smile.

Then, his muscles slacken. His gaze drifts. It’s as though he has momentarily forgotten they are there. His right hand fists in the sheets, then releases. Abigail shuffles in her seat.

‘Do you—do you—have—the—’

Will turns his head and fixes his eyes on him. Hannibal swallows.

‘Yes,’ he says. He doesn’t know what it is Will wants him to have, but if he doesn’t have it, he is confident he can get it.

Will gives a satisfied nod, then another.

‘Change,’ he remembers. ‘Money.’

‘I do have some change, Will.’

‘I want a coke.’ It’s phrased like an order, but his tone is soft: he’s not being demanding, he’s being efficient.

‘Are you allowed that?’ Hannibal asks, though he’s standing up already and feeling his coat pocket for the wallet. ‘That is a lot of caffeine, Will.’

‘I don’t know, aren’t you the doctor?’

Hannibal looks away first.

His knees feel weak on the trek down the quiet corridor. This is an intensive care unit and the patients tend toward silence, their monitors bleeping and humming for them. The walls smell of disinfectant and death.

He buys the can of coke from a vending machine pushed into a corner by the window. The pane isn’t well insulated and a breeze flitters in. He can’t tell if the anxiety settled low in his stomach is because he doesn’t know the man back in that hospital room, or because he thinks he might like to know him.

When he returns, he finds the card displayed on the bedside table and Abigail’s knees pressed against the mattress. She is leaning over to show Will her woven bracelet. He is tracing the weave with a thumb, as careful as if it were a live thing.

Hannibal opens the can and gets him a straw from the cup on the table. Will’s cheeks hollow when he drinks, both hands wrapped around the can as though he were a small child.

He soon discovers he shouldn’t have worried about the caffeine. Will struggles with swallowing and every sip he takes is carefully measured, every break used up for breathing and rest. Hannibal doubts he will get through a quarter of the can before he tires himself out.

‘He gets me them,’ Will volunteers as he sets the can down into his lap.

‘Who does?’

‘The—her,’ Will indicates something abstract with a hand, the motion jagged and awkward. ‘You and—you know. No. Her. No—*him.*’

‘A nurse? Alana?’ Hannibal tries, which makes Will groan out his frustration. Then, something clicks. ‘Does Jack get you those?’

Another nod.

‘Does Jack come often?’

Will’s face twists in a grimace. He shakes his head a little, then nods. It is utterly unclear how often Jack comes. Hannibal isn’t sure Will understands what *often* means, really.

‘That’s nice of him,’ Abigail comments drily.

Will angles his head to the side like he's considering it. 'I don't know,' he decides. 'I want to —dead—die every time, so—not that nice.'

'You want to die when Jack comes by?' Hannibal echoes back.

Will shakes his head. 'No, no. Jack.'

'Jack wants to die when he comes by?'

'Yep.'

'Did he tell you this?'

Will snorts. 'I'm brain damaged,' he says, 'not *blind*.'

Hannibal smiles a full smile.

Will tips toward Abigail. With an aborted look at Hannibal that's half-suspicion, half-displeasure, he asks in a low voice, 'What's his name?'

Abigail tenses. 'Hannibal,' she says.

'I remember that,' Will says immediately. It is very obviously a lie.

A minute ticks by in silence. Then, Will slides down his pillows and starts crying. There appears to have been nothing to trigger it: one moment Will's eyes are pleased, the next he scrunches them and pushes the heels of his hands into the hollows, like he's trying to force his eyeballs down and out through the back of his head.

Abigail shoots Hannibal an alarmed glance. He wonders whether she's reconsidering her stance on the traumatizing potential of this visit.

'Will.' He lays a hand on his shoulder, but Will bucks wildly to shake it off. 'Is something wrong? Did something upset you?'

Will shakes his head.

'You're crying,' Hannibal observes.

'Yeah,' Will sobs out, 'no kidding.'

He rolls to his side, facing away from them. His shoulders continue shaking.

'I'm going to the bathroom,' Abigail announces, and makes her escape.

Hannibal eases the can of coke out of Will's grip and sets it to the side. He sits and waits, watching the muscles in Will's back shift and flex with every spasm.

After a while, Will rolls back around to face him. His face is streaked with tears, but it's devoid of all emotion.

‘How are you feeling, Will?’

Will looks to the ceiling like he expects he will find the answer there. ‘I don’t know,’ he grouses. ‘Scary. Scared.’

‘What are you scared of?’

Will shrugs. ‘The monster?’ he guesses.

Hannibal hums.

‘For a short period, I lived in an orphanage as a child. There was a monster in the woods that surrounded it.’

Will’s eyes flash with curiosity. ‘There was a monster?’

‘Only in the winter, I think.’

Will makes a sound from the back of his throat: carry on.

‘Children who ventured too deep into the forest went missing. Our carers tried to convince us the children had been fostered or adopted, but we knew the truth. One night, one of the girls arrived late for dinner, a boot missing—she told us she’d gone into the forest to look for a missing friend and the monster pursued her. She’d twisted an ankle. Her neck was lined with long scratches, as if from a claw that gripped too loose.’

‘You went to—to table—hell—it. No.’

‘I wanted to find it,’ Hannibal admits. ‘I lay awake at night, wishing I could go into the woods for it. One night, I nearly did. They found me knee-deep in the snow, wearing only my nightshirt and drowsy with hypothermia. But I never found it then. I think you have, Will.’

Will’s eyes widen. His open features, his clear brow and his easy belief, they are all the very proof Hannibal came here to find. This man is *not* Will Graham.

‘You were running a fever,’ he murmurs, leaning in closer so that Will might hear him better, ‘and you went into the woods to cool down, bare feet on cold earth. You treaded deeper and deeper until you reached a place where snow never melts, and you sank into it for relief.’

‘Relief?’

‘Yes. And there you found a river covered with a glaze of ice. And a man who cracked the ice with only the heel of his foot and caught salmon in his bare hands. He looked just like you, but his eyes were black and deep, and he was naked except for the bear skin that he’d thrown over his shoulders.’

‘Cold,’ Will points out reasonably.

‘He wasn’t cold. He doesn’t feel the cold.’

‘No.’ His mouth purses tight as though this is one thing he will not compromise on. ‘No, he *is* cold.’

Hannibal considers this. ‘Maybe he is cold,’ he acquiesces, ‘but since he’s never left his snow kingdom, he doesn’t realize?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Alright. And this man, this Other Will, he fed you his salmon and he gave you water because you were hungry and thirsty. But when you told him you had to go back home, he said you were to take him with you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he wanted to be in the world, too. Maybe he was tired of living only in his fairy tale.’

‘No, why—why did you have to go home? I—I mean I. Why?’

‘You’d run out of Advil for your fever.’

‘Oh. Right.’

‘You could see the man was a monster. He had soft skin and soft hair, but you could see this was only a pretence, a game. You knew he was too dangerous to be allowed to come home with you.’

Will is nodding with a passion now, his eyes tied to Hannibal’s like he’s afraid he might sink if he lets go. There’s a thing in Hannibal that wants to look away. He doesn’t dare to.

‘But you knew you were dying. And the monster made you a deal: he’d given you food and drink and he would give you life, too, if only you led him out of the woods.’

‘I led?’

‘Did you lead him out of the woods?’

‘Yeah.’

Slowly so as not to spook him, Hannibal takes Will’s wrist and feels for the pulse there. It’s a weak and thready thing, but it cannot be denied.

‘You are alive,’ he says, ‘so I suppose so.’

‘Did you?’

‘Did I what, Will?’

‘Lead—led—the thing.’

‘Lead the monster out of the woods?’

Hannibal thinks about the warrior from his sketch, the one who slay the bear for him. He thinks about the games he and Mischa played as they crunched their steps into fresh snow. He thinks, at last, about running for his life through those same woods the night his childhood ended, and of the shape that followed him until he reached the village. Was it that same warrior? Was it some other phantasmagorical being, manufactured for childish comfort by a brain that was a mute scream and a body that struggled against hunger and exposure?

Or was it this Other Will, leading Hannibal out of the woods?

Unable to decide, he says only, ‘That’s a story for another time.’

Will’s teeth glisten wetly in the dark as his lips peel back. He smiles.

And when he does, Hannibal can’t help it anymore. Hannibal’s Will Graham is gone—that is what he’d meant to discover in coming here. But it is utterly inconceivable, too, to hold this knowledge in his mind as he looks into Will Graham’s face, and as he meets Will Graham’s eyes.

Will blinks, his eyes a bright, flickering blue. He whispers,

‘I remember that.’

And this time, strangely, it really does sound like the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, it's Christmas time!

The Ghost

Chapter Summary

Christmas at the ward, All Saints' Day ghosts, and a haircut.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seven: The Ghost.

‘What’s this?’

‘Pumpkin soup, Will.’

‘What?’

‘Pumpkin soup.’

Will laughs. ‘Say it again.’

‘Pumpkin soup.’

Another giggle. He’s pulling at the hair that’s grown too long down his neck. It gathers sweat and gets into his eyes, but when the hospital barber paid a visit on a nurse’s request, Will hid under the duvet and keened until he went away.

‘Can you say it, Will?’

Will shakes his head. Sunlight fills the pool of sheets in his lap. He’s clean-shaven today: the beard growing in was scratchy, which ultimately proved worse than the necessity of Hannibal touching his face.

‘Can’t say it how you say it.’

‘You mean *pumpkin soup*?’

Will scrunches his eyes. His chest shakes with laughter.

‘Pumpkin soup?’

‘Stop!’ He wriggles as though tickled, away from the manifestation of Hannibal’s voice.

He looks like an angel today, Hannibal thinks. He would sketch him, but Will doesn’t like that.

There are many things Will doesn't like these days, yet they're all perfunctory defences. He's still so easy: a crossword puzzle filled in with invisible ink, a maze lain with Ariadne's thread. Even at his easiest, Will Graham was never *this,* before—always a wall, a trench, a hunter's moon presaging peril. It is as though that aspect of him has cracked off, and what little of Will remains is only the seed of a person, yearning openly for warmth and water.

Hannibal ladles some of the soup on the spoon and lifts it to his lips to check the temperature. When he presses it close to Will's mouth, Will mirrors his actions perfectly, dipping only the top lip into the thick liquid, chin quivering at the sensation.

'What do you smell, Will?'

'Probably pumpkin.'

He tilts his head back to swallow. In this, the loose muscles in his throat are a hark and a grumble more than they are help.

Hannibal gets another spoonful and raises it to his nose in a mimicry of sniffing. 'Ginger,' he tells Will. 'Turmeric. Mustard seeds.'

'Sure.'

'It's important, Will. We need to let your doctor know if your sense of smell starts coming back.'

Will ignores that. 'The other patients get food from the nurses.'

'They're eating hospital food because they don't know any better. We do.'

'We do?'

'Hm.'

Another spoonful. Will is fidgeting already: he won't eat much more unless Hannibal distracts him.

'When do pumpkins grow, Will?'

'The ground.'

'That's *where.*'

'I know. Fall. Oh—Halloween.'

'Yes.'

He winces when Hannibal tries to give him another, but at a show of insistence he eases his mouth open. The spoon clatters against teeth.

'I'm tired.'

‘Shall I tell you a story?’

Will glares at him like he knows what he’s trying to do and refuses to fall for it.

‘In Lithuania,’ Hannibal begins, ‘we did not celebrate Halloween. Instead on All Saints’ Day, we cared for the lost souls that wander the Earth after death, not knowing which path to follow into the beyond. My sister and I left buttered bread for them on the kitchen table overnight, and poured milk over their graves, and burned fires in our family graveyard to light their way and keep them warm.’

Alana caught a sliver of a story he told Will, once. She drew him into the hallway after and advised against stoking the fires of Will’s confusion. ‘He’s already struggling to tell what’s real,’ she whispered. ‘He’s still—do you see him looking into every dark corner, at night? And the other day, I asked him if he’d been having a bad dream because he woke up drenched—and he didn’t understand what I *meant*.’

She argued for at the very least discussing the matter with Will’s doctor. Hannibal told her she was free to do so. He’s unsure whether she followed through; in any case, Doctor Haynes is entirely too busy to police Will’s every waking moment, and Hannibal suspects she wouldn’t have cared very much.

The stories make sense to Hannibal. Like a child, Will is new and open wide, and like a child he sees the turreted walls between reality and fantasy merely as lines in the sand. That isn’t a problem to be solved or a weakness to be remedied: it is a strength that will make trees bow and lay the ground with golden rugs, for him alone.

The more stories Hannibal tells, the better he remembers what that felt like. He sometimes wonders if he misses it more than he misses Mischa. Yes. No. Perhaps.

‘We left bread in the dark kitchen and ran up to bed in a frenzy. I wasn’t sure even then, but I imagined this was done because these lost souls didn’t like to be watched as they ate.’ Hannibal stirs the soup. ‘In any case, it was always gone in the morning. Only the crust remained, bitten clean by sharp teeth.’

‘No,’ Will says. ‘You can’t watch them because it’s dangerous.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. All year, they go hungry and then all they get is bread and butter. I’d be—I’d be—’

‘Disappointed?’

‘No—’ He kicks at the sheets in frustration. His words come and go these days, and it gets worse when he’s put on the spot like this. One time a doctor pointed at Hannibal and asked Will for his name, and Will struggled so much he worked himself into hysteria.

‘Upset?’

‘*Pissed*.’

Hannibal smiles. ‘I see.’

‘They’d eat you whole.’ There’s never a trace of doubt in Will when he completes Hannibal’s tales; whatever he sees in his mind’s eye, he believes wholeheartedly. ‘If you came down and they smelled you, they’d eat you whole.’

‘I did come down one year.’

Will stiffens. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yes. I came down to the kitchen and I saw a wraith. I recognized her as a long-dead relative. My grandfather had an older sister who died very young—the little girl was found dead in the woods one day, struck down by a sudden illness no one could understand, and because my great-grandmother was a covert pagan, she’d never been christened. That night, I came down and that little girl stood there hollow-cheeked and bright-eyed, too pale in the light of the moon.’

‘How old was she?’

‘I was still a child and I remember I thought her small. She stood, unblinking, eating around the crust.’

‘She didn’t see you?’

‘No. I wanted her to see me. I called out, but she acted as though I weren’t real.’

Will leans back on his pillows, reflective.

‘Try jam next time.’ The corner of his lip twitches: he’s being humorous on purpose. ‘What kind of jam does your sister like?’

‘She liked strawberry.’

‘Try that.’

Hannibal takes a moment to marvel at this leap. It is as though even the stories in which he doesn’t feature, Will knows better than Hannibal does.

The mid-afternoons are like this: rimmed golden with easy pleasure. But Hannibal comes back for the evenings, too, and those are worse. Suggestions of shapes in the shadows spike Will’s fevers; the fevers and fears trigger seizures. Will’s doctor puts him on this and that and this again, but none of it will work properly as long as his brain is inflamed. At night, Will begs: he begs the doctor not to kill him, he begs the nurse to run away, he begs Hannibal not to smile in the low light.

Tonight, Alana is there too. Will screams at her when she moves too far into the room, and doesn’t calm until they are both perched on one side of the bed, with their backs turned on him.

‘You can’t look at me,’ he orders, teeth clattering. ‘You can’t look at me or I’ll smell you.’

Alana throws Hannibal a look that's entirely baseless accusation. Yes, Will *is* referring back to a story Hannibal told him, but she has no way of knowing that.

'I told you I'd be here tonight,' she whispers.

'Yes, I remember.'

'And you don't trust me alone with him? What is this?'

'I never said that.'

'I will remind you that I was here, alone with him, back when you were off evading responsibility, Hannibal.'

Hannibal might feel offended if responsibility had anything to do with why he is here now. 'Evading my responsibility to Will as his friend and therapist,' he rephrases softly. 'I wonder: in what capacity do *you* feel responsible?'

Her face colours. Behind them, Will is breathing hard but steady. The mattress shifts when a shiver goes through him.

'Excuse me.' A nurse pushes the door open with an elbow, hands full of compress. 'You can't sit on there. It's not hygienic, is it?'

Alana immediately slips to standing. 'I'm sorry,' she says. 'Of course. Hannibal?'

'Nah, he can stay.'

Hannibal doesn't allow himself to *quite* smile.

'I know this one puts on fresh clothes before he shows up.' The nurse lays the compress on Will's forehead and shushes his whine. 'Spends more time in this place than I do. Ah, look at this, been scratching again—I'll get you those baby mittens on strings one day if you keep at it.'

Around where the IV line sits in his wrist, Will's skin is indeed vividly red and peeling off. He knows now not to pull out the IV, but nothing stops him from assaulting all the places he feels the spread of its venom into flesh.

'I'll get him some ointment—wash your hands and put it on him, won't you? I got to rush.'

'Of course,' Hannibal says, not taking his eyes off Alana for a moment.

Once the nurse has left, Alana's shoulders drop. She is resigning herself to setting aside this particular row. It is their custom, by now, to do so.

'I'm going to see what I can do about tea,' she says. 'Would you like anything?'

'No, thank you.'

While she stalks the cafeteria, Hannibal rubs ointment into Will's forearm. Will's eyes are on him throughout, glazed over with exhaustion. When Hannibal smiles at him, he smiles back, just a little, and then his eyes drift shut. Like every night, Hannibal is the last thing he sees.

Franklyn spends his final session of the year droning on about Christmas. His sister wants him to dress up as Santa for his nieces but he's going to feel ridiculous; his friend Tobias is impossible to shop for; he knows for a fact that his mother regifted the expensive watch he'd given her last year. Hannibal assures him the holidays are a time of increased stress for many patients. He fails to mention that none of them complain about it quite as much.

On Christmas Day, a pair of volunteers lay siege to the neurology ward. An hour in they make the mistake of putting a Santa hat on a comatose patient and are chased off by belligerent nurses.

'I think I'd have enjoyed a Santa hat when I was in a coma,' Abigail tells him. 'They should really let coma patients live a little.'

She is wearing an ill-fitting Christmas sweater that she's borrowed from another girl at the ward. Every time she forgets to stop herself, she tucks her hands under her armpits and brutally pinches the fabric. It leaves wrinkles that might be difficult to get rid of. Hannibal repeats to her what he said to Franklyn about Christmas proving a trying period for many, but she offers only a shrug in response.

The volunteers have gifted Will a festive hat, too. He doesn't look particularly festive in it, just uncomfortable.

'Would you like to take it off, Will?'

'No,' he says, sounding heartbroken about it.

Alana is visiting with family, but she dropped by yesterday and presented Will with a framed photograph of his pack, with each dog's name written out in silver cursive. It rests in his lap when Hannibal and Abigail arrive. The moment Hannibal sets his bags down, Will offers it up. He has read out the names so many times by now that he remembers them perfectly, but Will doesn't—and he can't yet read them himself.

'Would you show Abigail your picture?' Hannibal suggests, digging out stacks of Tupperware with the horribly mundane Christmas fare he has prepared, to account for Will's distaste of anything remotely flavourful.

Abigail reads the names four times over before Will is distracted by one of the containers popping open. He wrinkles his nose.

'What's that?'

'Mushrooms, Will. Can you smell them?'

'I'm not eating that.'

Hannibal inclines his head to indicate he has understood and finishes plating the food. Two of the nurses peer curiously inside the room, so he makes sure they get their fair share: a slice of Christmas roast is hardly a high price to pay for two additional allies. They chatter about the food a while, then set to questioning Abigail on her school, her interests and her love life; Hannibal cannot tell if she is mortified in the face of this faux normality or comforted by it.

He sidles close to Will so he can help him with the food while he eats his own. Their shoulders and thighs press together like this, and the bob at the end of Will's hat knocks into the side of Hannibal's head when he moves.

'You smelled the mushrooms,' he tells him softly.

'Yeah. They're disgusting.'

'Would you like some gravy with your potatoes? Or at least some peas?'

'No, I don't like peas.'

Hannibal considers him. He hasn't brought him peas before. His memory *has* been getting better: more and more, he can relate back to Hannibal conversations they had the day before, and he can recall the time of day and whether that means Hannibal is saying good morning or good night. So far, this hasn't translated into recovering memories from before his illness.

'You know what I like?'

'What do you like, Will?'

Will thinks about it for a moment. 'Cheesecake,' he says.

The hope, faint and thready, dissipates like a candle blown.

'That's good: we're having cheesecake for dessert. I told you yesterday I'd make cheesecake because I know you like it, do you remember?'

A shadow over his face. Little though Will understands of the grander forces at play, he can feel Hannibal's disappointment and knows that means there is something wrong that evades him. It makes his hands shake.

When the nurses leave and the plates are put away, Abigail sits on the bed next to him and Will brightens up. He has asked Hannibal a few times about Abigail's age and where she lived, but no more than that. Though this is only the third time she has visited, Will seems to recall her perfectly, and appears at ease with knowing nothing else about her.

They are sharing a pair of earphones now, heads dipped close together to regard the screen of Abigail's phone, searching for any tracks Will might remember. Abigail's shoulders droop loose, one foot on the bed and the other swinging to the rhythm of the music; Will's face is set in concentration as though he is taking an important exam.

Before all this, back when Will Graham was whole, he told Hannibal he wasn't made for love. If he wasn't then, he is now: exactly and with flair, as though by Hannibal's own

design.

‘This one.’

‘Yeah?’ Abigail grins. ‘Will remembers the Macarena.’

‘That is good news,’ Hannibal says. ‘I regret I’m not sure what type of music Will enjoyed. We could narrow down the search.’

‘It’s the only one he’s recognized so far. I think he’d listen to the Macarena on repeat and nothing else.’

Will looks confused as to what the joke is, but he mirrors Abigail’s laugh right on cue.

They do presents after. Abigail gets a set of scarves, in a much nicer fabric than the cheap things she insists on wearing, signed by Hannibal and Will, who copied out the letters of his name thrice before he was satisfied with it. Will gets two woven bracelets in earthy tones that Abigail secures around his wrist, and a warm red cotton sweater, knit in a chunky pattern that he can run his fingers over. Hannibal helps him put it over his hospital gown, taking the opportunity to smooth the set of the fabric on the shoulders and back.

The sun sets by the time they’re done. The moment the last traces of blood red drain from the skies, Will’s eyes sag deeper into his skull, his mouth dries, and his mood shifts. Hannibal wonders sometimes if his self-conception might be so flimsy that Will empathizes now not only with people, but the elements themselves—if he’s affected by the tide and the alignment of the stars.

When he cries, there’s no theatre to it: silent tears roll down his cheeks, hands are shoved away, and he wraps his arms around his chest as he spits orders at Hannibal to move away from him.

‘I have to drive Abigail back now, Will,’ he tells him clearly. ‘Thank you for spending time with us today.’

Will half-laughs, half-sobs. ‘I don’t even know who you are,’ he chokes out.

The words stay with them, bloating the silence. Conversation seems futile in their wake, so Hannibal and Abigail drive without talking, without music, just the rumble of the engine and whatever it is that Will’s words have come to mean.

He doesn’t know them, is what they mean to Hannibal. He never will: not really.

‘A walk?’ he offers when they pull up at the ward, the gloom brightened by buzzing lanterns and garden lights set into the earth. It’s chilly, but not all cold for December, and the snow dancing in the air is loose and sparse, for show more than anything.

They take the long route round, along the walls. He wonders if she’s always aware of the walls, even when they’re out of sight. He would be.

‘Is he going to get better?’ Abigail asks suddenly.

‘I don’t know,’ he says truthfully. ‘I believe he will.’

She nods once. Then, ‘Is he going to get back to normal? To what he was like before?’

‘Are you going to? Is that the purpose of your stay here?’

‘There’s no purpose,’ she bites out. ‘I just don’t have any other choice.’

‘For now.’

She steps closer to him to avoid a puddle. The path turns muddy here, wired with weeds.

‘I don’t think Will can ever be the man he was before.’ The statement sits leaden on his tongue. ‘I don’t think that is a fair or useful demand to make of him.’

‘I’m not,’ she bristles. ‘I was just asking.’

There’s offense in her voice, but relief in her face. He is alone, then, in this.

‘Is it horrible that I’m happy he doesn’t remember he saved my life?’

‘Why does that make you happy?’

She shrugs. ‘I get to pretend like I don’t remember it either, I guess.’

‘You say you’d rather forget, yet your actions strike me as the actions of one who feels indebted.’

‘I don’t feel indebted. But we were both in that kitchen. He’s broken, I’m broken. I don’t know. I just feel tied to that, somehow.’

‘It’s natural to feel tied to such a pivotal moment in your life. And to the people who lived through it with you.’

She looks at the skies. ‘The thing is, I actually feel like the ties are looser now, with Will,’ she says, ‘Now that he can’t remember, I see him and I feel nothing. It makes it easier, but also like I’m—I’m not afraid of him anymore. And I liked him more when I was afraid of him. How awful is that?’

Hannibal tries to contain the yearning that swells in him. ‘It’s not awful. When we struggle against fear, we feel our power. Does living without fear make you feel powerless, Abigail?’

‘Sounds like something Doctor Bloom would say.’

‘Does it?’

‘Well, according to *her*, I feel like surviving without anything to threaten survival makes me weak. That the only power I can find is when I’m surviving in spite of something.’

‘That is quite the claim for her to make.’

Abigail's lip quirks. Her gaze slides away, on the verge of abashed. 'I kind of said it first. She just put it into words that actually make sense.'

The night feels large around them, the air bright with oxygen. They stop by the conservatory and try the door, but the guards put a lock on it overnight and it won't budge. Hannibal is about to lead her back onto the beaten path, but then he'd have to say goodnight and head back to D.C. to check on Will, and suddenly that is the last thing he can bear.

'Can you pick a lock, Abigail?'

She blinks, then grins. 'I'm a quick learner.'

They go back to the car to get his lockpick set and the leftovers from dinner. Their feet leave shallow prints in the icing of fresh snow, going there and back in circles—Abigail says they must, to cover up their tracks, so they move erratically like bees rounding an abandoned ice-lolly.

She is indeed a quick learner, taking to the art immediately, hissing her delight when the padlock slides free. She is good with her hands and she is precise enough: she might take well to drawing too, if she was taught the basics.

She might have taken well enough to lure-making as well. He sees her, twining a crimson thread around the glint of a hook, Will craning to peer over her elbow. He used to think that was impossible, a fever dream of Will's that Abigail would have had little interest in; but with time, perhaps Hannibal could have made it true. He misses it now: a past that could have been a future but wasn't.

The feeling is wrong, awkwardly jammed in between nostalgia and indifference. The older he is, the more possible futures he is leaving behind, but they are not supposed to be things to want for, only exercises in imagination.

They sit on their favourite bench, eyes gradually acquainting themselves with the dark. Abigail's auburn hair fades into the background until all he sees of her is the pale of the face.

'What are these?'

'Deep-fried wild mushroom dumplings.'

'They're good.'

'I can see that.'

She's hogging the lot of them, fingers greasy from popping them right into her mouth. Hannibal doesn't mind the appalling manners. She looks younger tonight; in daylight, she is more woman than child, but here now, she is liminal.

'One of the nurses asked me what I wanted to do,' she says, looking up close at the dumpling pinched between her index and thumb. 'With my life. And I wanted to say something generic, you know—about going to college and seeing what I like, or wanting a job where I can do

something meaningful, or *anything*. It's not like it matters what I say to her. But I couldn't come up with a single lie.'

'Why do you think that is?'

'Because when I try to imagine my future,' she says bitterly, '*any* future, I don't see anything.'

'It sounds distressing.'

She snorts. Hannibal gives her a smile, and there must be an unexpected sincerity in it she catches when she glances over, because the dry humour bleeds out of her.

Hannibal supposes can't see the future either. He can see today and tomorrow, but what happens after that? Will won't be at the hospital forever. It's impossible to imagine him placed back into the world, enacting his own will. What is Hannibal to do with him then?

Hannibal enjoys being surprised. But flexibility isn't the same as blindness, and the blank he sees before him feels less like potential and more like helplessness.

'We make the future every day, even if we fail to see it,' he says. 'Chiselling away at a slab of rock until one day it reveals itself a Venus winged.'

'I don't think I'm making a Venus.'

'No? What are you making?'

One corner of Abigail's lip turns up. 'A gravestone? Is that morbid enough?'

'I would say so.'

When he leaves her that night, Hannibal doesn't go back to the hospital.

He fully intends to, at first; but then, the wheel of the car turns and he's driving roads he's driven before, reliving a shadow of the eagerness he once felt, the mental images of Will's rooms and Will's routines forming fast in the corners of his eyes.

Wolf Trap tonight is a different place entirely from how Hannibal remembers it. The dark has swallowed the empty house; the quiet is so thick it makes it difficult to breathe. The jangle of the keys in his hand is like thunder. He has to press his fingers into the metal to stop himself from turning around and making sure no one heard him.

Turning the light on makes it worse. Warmth feels deceptive. The floor creaks under Hannibal's every step, and then it creaks more—he keeps himself perfectly still but he can hear it anyway, cracks and whispers slithering from the stairway and the rooms he hasn't yet lit. It is as though Will himself has left echoes as he walked the length of the house, every morning and night, and even now that he's gone they still refuse to fade.

In the pocket of his coat, his fingers search until they tighten around warm bone. The tip of the bear's tusk digs into the meat of his palm.

Perhaps he doesn't see the future because he doesn't want it. He wants this only: the crawling fear of a past that won't be shaken loose.

Belatedly, he tries to think of a reason why he might have come here. He searches through the study, dust swirling at his every poke, and exhumes two worn albums, bitten at the corners with age.

The first is exclusively black-and-white. A burly boy with Will's wide eyes is pushing a girl, Botticelli curls and easy glamour, into the inky lake. In another photograph, a faded woman reclines on her porch: like Will's porch, white and sparse, and Will's lips curl into a smile on her alien face. Another page and Will is here, too: sitting on his father's lap, involved in a complex game of pebbles, walking around with hands fisted into a pair shoes as though they are his paws. Even there, in the midst of a child's whimsy, he looks sombre, almost austere, his eyes and disposition too big for his face.

The other album has fewer pictures of people. There are dogs, some that Hannibal recognizes and others he does not; there is technicolour spilling from landscapes of nature and city alike; Will and his father share a look of unease as they smile at the camera on his graduation day. Caverns awe in between these snapshots of life. The album is less a past than it is the absence of one—Hannibal struggles to accept that Will had been real at all before he laid his eyes on him.

When he's setting the albums into the trunk, his eye catches on the food. There's little left over: what they didn't finish, he's left for Abigail to have later. In the trunk now remain only a bit of bread, half a cup of gravy and a thin slice of cheesecake—a meagre offering indeed. Still, he climbs back up to the porch and sets them on the railing, by the side of the post where the spectre of Will's hallucination left his talisman.

Yes, it is true that Will lives, but it's equally true that Will is dead and that Hannibal is haunted. They can both be true at once, as they were both true that All Saints' Night: getting Mischa, who sleepwalked often, back to bed on tiptoes and with prodding pushes—and the omen of death he saw in the kitchen, presaging the end of all they knew.

He drives to the hospital in the morning and finds Will unresponsive, eyes blank and face slack with nothing. He doesn't speak to Hannibal and he turns his eyes away when he tries to show him the album of childhood photos. He's stripped back down to his hospital-issue set; Hannibal finds the red sweater bunched up and stuffed into the drawer at his bedside.

It's much the same that afternoon and evening, and the same the day after. Hannibal considers that Will might be upset with him for missing their final appointment on Christmas Day. He considers that Will might feel overtired from the day's social excesses. But the longer the glum drowse maintains a hold on him, the less any of his theories make sense.

'Apathy is normal,' Doctor Haynes tells Hannibal. 'Depression is understandable. Sit with him, wait, talk, he'll get better. If he doesn't, we'll get a psychiatrist in.'

'I am a psychiatrist.'

'There you are then.'

Hannibal frowns at her. He wants Will better, not worse—what is he supposed to do with a Will who doesn't react when prodded? 'I am concerned he's regressing in his recovery.'

'I don't think he is, actually.' She looks at him, the golden rims of her glasses slicing the dark irises perfectly in half. 'I think he's improved enough to start realizing the magnitude of what's happened to him. You'd be depressed too, I bet.'

Hannibal sincerely doubts it: he does not get depressed. But he supposes Will has a right to, and takes care not to press the issue, resolving instead to wait him out.

He doesn't force Will to speak but himself talks easily, as though Will's silence is answer enough. He doesn't urge him to look at his childhood photographs but describes them aloud. Even Will's past, now, is only whatever Hannibal chooses for him.

Day by day, Hannibal's own melancholy lifts, and that in turn causes Will to watch him with eyes brighter and curiouser. They are fast approaching a new year and with the new year come new possibilities; the past, entrancing though it may appear skewed by perspective, belongs in a closed volume set to a high shelf. If Will's low mood is a response to recovery, then that means he is recovering, and he is doing so right here, in Hannibal's palm, kept easy and warm and malleable. There *is* no future where he wields his will and threatens Hannibal's —he will grow into whatever Hannibal wishes.

He may not be Will Graham, but he is an opportunity unlike any other, and that in the end is all that matters.

He's chatting at Will one morning, dull and misty, about the eggs and the tea he's brought for him, setting up breakfast and barely sparing him a glance, and then he asks idly, 'Would you like some cream on those, Will?'

And Will says, 'No.'

Hannibal looks up sharply. Will is staring directly at him.

'Alright. Just the eggs, then.'

'No.'

'You don't want the eggs?'

'No,' Will says a third time, then cants his head, cheek and chin forming a sharp line. 'Does it matter?'

'I've only brought you eggs today, but I can get you something else tomorrow.'

'So it doesn't matter.'

Hannibal considers him. He's unsure what Will wants from him.

'You don't want to eat breakfast today.'

‘No.’

‘Alright.’

He fetches a glass and pours out the tea. It’s a deep blue. He doesn’t strain it, instead allowing the flower petals to float freely in the glass. They’ll have to catch them between their teeth: a challenge to wake Will up.

‘In Asia, butterfly-pea flowers have been used as a source of dye for centuries,’ he explains. ‘The herbal drink is often enjoyed with honey and lemon.’

He stirs the honey in himself but gives Will the lemon to squeeze over the rim. Will knocks it into the glass, spilling a little on his hand before he identifies the right muscle to tense, but soon downy drops are successfully scattering threads of purple into the blue.

‘The tint changes depending on the acidity of the solution.’

‘Yeah,’ Will says, pleased. He blows his bangs out of his eyes, and again until Hannibal can’t stand it anymore and reaches, intent on tucking them to the side.

Will jerks away, spills the now brightly purple brew all over the sheets, and immediately takes to kicking them off.

‘—get it off me!’

The nurses aren’t going to be happy with Hannibal today.

‘You spilled my tea,’ Will complains once the sheets have been swapped for fresh, non-sticky ones.

‘I’d say it was rather a joint effort, Will.’

‘*You* spilled my tea,’ he repeats, fierce.

Hannibal decides this isn’t a hill he is willing to die on. ‘I have some more.’ He pulls out the thermos again. ‘Would you consider letting me cut your hair?’

‘I don’t know. Do I have a choice?’

His expression is combative, but it is clear he already knows the answer. He has no choice in any way that matters, and Hannibal smiles at the cleverness of recognizing it as such.

‘You can decide you’d like the barber to cut it instead,’ he says agreeably. ‘Or you can leave it as is and hope it will stop bothering you once you’ve got used to it.’

‘That’s a shitty choice.’

‘Such is often the nature of agency.’

Hannibal sets a chair in the centre of the room, facing the window, and borrows a pair of scissors from a nurse. Will is unsteady on his feet, knees trembling with the effort of keeping upright, his legs spindly things that look not at all like Hannibal remembers them. He fists his hands in Hannibal's shirt as they walk from the bed to the chair, as though afraid of falling into the hollow of the distance.

When he sits, he sits heavy and trembling. Hannibal shuffles at his hair to try and find any sort of shape in it. As he does, he pulls out large clumps of knotted black, darkened by oil and lack of sun.

The hair loss will be an illusion woven by infrequent washes, of course, but it will also be a very real effect of the steroids. He runs the clumps into tight balls between his hands and sets them into a tissue to pocket, away from Will's eyes.

Will is stiff as a rod at first, but as Hannibal begins to cut, he relaxes into the metallic snips and the warm strokes of Hannibal's thumb. He tenses again when Hannibal eases the bangs over his forehead and cuts there, so Hannibal starts talking, telling him anything about hair he can think of: the little yapping dog his stylist likes to show him videos of, how fairies steal locks of hair from children because they know hair holds a human's power, how his uncle took a sudden interest in Hannibal's education a month short of his high school exams and abolished him from getting a haircut.

'Knowledge is stored in hair,' he relates the argument to Will. 'It's very bad luck to cut your hair before an important exam.'

'How long—he—hair—did it get?'

Hannibal draws a gentle line on the side of Will's throat. Will's head dips to him, chasing it. 'Nearly down to my shoulders. I would brush it back so it resembled a mullet. They were very fashionable back then.'

A glint of teeth in Will's smile, like a ray of sun cutting through the day's fog. 'You should get one now.'

'Should I?'

'Hm.'

He brushes the loose strands off Will's shoulders, then carefully removes any strays from his cheeks. He looks more alive now that his face is unobstructed: more real.

'What should we do with the hair?' he asks, hunching at Will's lap to shuffle the dead hairs into a dustpan. 'All this power—we wouldn't want any fairies getting hold of it.'

When he peers up at Will, he finds him unsmiling.

'Burn it,' he says, toneless.

That very night, after he's seen Will to sleep and picked up bread for tomorrow, Hannibal drives to Wolf Trap. He burns the hair in Will's fireplace, watching until the last of it colours

red-golden and collapses to ash.

He opens all the windows to try and air out the sulphurous smell—it will cling to him for days, he knows, reminding him of this moment now—and he pays a tribute of silence to the Will Graham who once evaded him.

As he's walking back to his car, he halts. He is struck half by what he sees and half by not having noticed before.

The railing around the porch where he's left his food offering is bare and empty.

Not even a crumb remains.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, Will returns to Wolf Trap.
Thank you for reading!

The House

Chapter Summary

Will returns to Wolf Trap.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eight: The House.

Thaw comes prematurely, on the day he drives Will home.

The new year has rolled itself a muddied carpet of tired grass peaking timidly from the slush, and of roads so wet they gleam blinding in the hard winter sun. Will spends the drive fiddling with the straps of his bag, resolutely ignoring the world spread outside the window. He hasn't shown any joy at the prospect of returning to Wolf Trap. Hannibal is positive he'd been going to refuse outright before he was promised that the IV line could come out of his wrist; and even then, he made it clear to Hannibal he saw the whole thing as a personal slight.

He has also ignored Hannibal's every attempt at conversation since he arrived at the ward four hours ago. It isn't unexpected: new places are uniquely suited to upsetting him, and few new places are so closely tied to a past from which he has preserved only vague impressions. The first time Hannibal accompanied him on a stroll to the hospital cafeteria, Will had a violent panic attack, ripped out his IV, bled all over the tray stand, and then slept stubbornly for twenty-four hours straight.

The IV is now gone. Hannibal remains optimistic.

Days have begun to get longer, but by the time they pull up at the house dusk is already tugging the sun toward the horizon. Hannibal parks as far into the patch of grass as he dares in the hope of avoiding the bog of the driveway. He suspects they'll still be dragging mud into the house no matter what they do.

'Here we are,' he announces unnecessarily as the engine rumbles down.

'Joy,' Will snaps. He wrenches the belt out of the buckle, stumbles out into a puddle of muck, and smacks the door shut hard enough for Hannibal's teeth to ring with it.

His agitation grows throughout Hannibal's fumble with the keys. He stares down the house then the driveway, eyes flicking between the road and the car and Hannibal like he is trying to work out how the three of them are connected. But then, the door clicks open and the dogs erupt from inside, all of their careful training apparently forgotten—and the hysteria never comes.

Will settles on the floor in the lounge, facing away from Hannibal and into the cavern of the cold fireplace, king among the assorted dog beds and the assorted dogs. The pack lick and peck at his hands, his feet, his face. The largest, Betty, seems increased in size now that she stands next to Will's slight form, and there is a moment when her weight nearly topples him over—but she eases off after, and since Will appears perfectly at peace with the assault, Hannibal leaves them be.

He takes his time unpacking. Will's clothes go in the laundry basket upstairs, the intravenous steroids and seizure medicine go in the fridge alongside fresh groceries, the non-perishables are ordered and organised into the kitchen cabinets. The bed is dressed with a quilted protector pad and new sheets, and straws for drinks are distributed into cups at several strategic locations.

When he checks on Will, he finds him curled on his side, covered with a duvet of fur. They are all of them moving as one, rising and falling gently in time with breath. Hannibal sincerely hopes Alana heeded his words and kept the dogs away from the bacteria hives that are the parks and streets of Baltimore. If his immunocompromised patient as much as sneezes, he will know exactly who to blame.

He prepares dinner, sweet potato mash and a Bosnian stew, which he cooked yesterday but cooks again now until the chunks of vegetables turn into mush and the meat is falling apart in his fingers. It's horrid, but it has to be if he expects Will to eat. His swallowing is still laboured and he dislikes his speech therapist, so progress has been slow.

He leaves the stew to simmer and ventures upstairs. This is the face of the house he doesn't recognize, where homeliness in maroon and cobalt blue disappears, and the floors are cold and lain in dust. The large bathroom to the side of the stairway, Will's only garrison on the second floor, holds little mystery; but beyond lie rooms Hannibal hasn't explored before, too taken by the diverse temptations of the spaces Will inhabits, which were always superior in his eyes to the vague promise of the spaces he does not.

But the absence of Will is almost as important a feature of Hannibal's day-to-day now as his presence. Also, he hopes that one of the abandoned rooms might hold a spare bed. He's spent the last week idly browsing options for delivery, but no bed on offer satisfied him and in the end the whole matter slipped his mind. If the house doesn't produce a rescue raft, he'll be sleeping on the floor tonight. At least the pain in his back will ensure he doesn't forget to pick up the search tomorrow.

The upper floor is divided into three bedrooms, two of which peer out over the driveway through the twin dormer windows: the eyes of the house. These are largely empty and uncluttered. The third room, set to the back, has a remarkable view over the forest, and holds turrets of cardboard boxes, fabrics, chairs, armoires and other miscellanea passed onto Will by the house's previous owners and subsequently exiled into the bedroom of forget.

There appears to be no bed.

The stairs let out a creak and a groan. Hannibal doesn't turn, allowing Will the time to conquer the climb on his own and recover the balance after.

‘What are you—wandering—on here?’

Hannibal has been hoping the nap might improve his mood. Clearly, he has miscalculated.

‘I’m not wandering around, Will. I’m only trying to find somewhere to sleep.’

Will draws closer. A print of the rug adorns his right cheek. ‘Try the bed.’

At times, Hannibal still struggles to tell when Will is being deliberately snappish and when he is genuinely confused. He suspects Will recognizes this, and intentionally adopts the tone to cover up uncertainty.

He decides to play it safe and sticks to a straight answer. ‘You’ll be sleeping in the bed,’ he explains. ‘I need another for myself.’

The set of Will’s shoulders relaxes slightly. ‘Where do the dogs sleep?’ he asks uncertainly, the attitude all gone.

‘They have their own beds downstairs in the lounge. It’s the large room by the fireplace, do you remember?’

Will jerks his head *yes*. Then, the corner of his mouth twitches. ‘Seems like everyone’s got a bed except for you.’

Hannibal smiles. ‘That is exactly my problem.’

‘Still can’t wander around here. This—this is all my stuff. Isn’t it?’

Genuine. ‘Yes, it is, Will. But—’

‘Then I say you’re not allowed to wander.’

Hannibal reminds himself that Will’s illness has effectively stripped him of agency. It is only natural he will claw and clutch his way through the debris until he finds a morsel of control, and once he has it, he will not let go.

And so, Hannibal nods and returns downstairs. If he drags the two armchairs from the study together, he might even be able to stretch his legs out.

They have not discussed next steps. Hannibal and Alana have discussed them, of course, and concluded Hannibal would stay with Will for the time it takes them to find a live-in care assistant. The assistant would stay until—if—Will improves. But it is impossible to tell what Will thinks of this, because he falls into silence anytime the topic is mentioned. Alana suspects long-term planning is as of now beyond the scope of his understanding; Hannibal suspects Will doesn’t care to share his thoughts.

Dinner is an exercise in dread. Will knows Hannibal will administer his medication after, and Hannibal knows Will won’t make that easy. The stew has a pleasant flavour, but the texture is wrong, and Hannibal has to force it down bite after bite.

Once they're done, Will shows a surprising eloquence as he announces his refusal to be 'pinned and speared and prodded.' Hannibal compliments him on the word choice, reminds him he can't swallow pills yet, and assures it will be over quickly. Seeing as the mere idea of a needle causes Will to hyperventilate, this is most certainly overly optimistic.

In the end, he manages to convince Will to close his eyes and stay still only once he had driven himself into panic once, then again, and finally been packed into a pile with the dogs. Hannibal finds himself in the precarious position of kneeling halfway on a wriggling Chip and a growling Buster, who has ambitiously taken it upon himself to assume the role of Will's protector for the night. Will unhelpfully responds with a continuous stream of praise and pets. From breaking the seal on a fresh syringe to putting on the band-aid, the whole affair robs Hannibal of forty-five minutes of his life.

'This would be much easier for you if you'd kept the IV, Will,' he points out as he pulls off the gloves. 'Perhaps you'd allow me to start a new one tomorrow?'

'Buster's ancestors were hunters.' Will pulls the little beast close to his chest, where it quietens down immediately. He kisses over the floppy ear and whispers, 'Dream of the chase tonight, Buster.'

Will doesn't own a dishwasher, so everything must be done by hand. Hannibal's eyelids droop heavy as he smothers the plates in foam. The time is hardly late, but he has spent the past few days stretched thin between the hospital, his practice, preparing Wolf Trap for Will's return and finding referrals for the patients that cannot go without care for two weeks. Maybe three weeks. Four. He can hardly imagine staying trapped in Wolf Trap that long, but neither does he enjoy the idea of leaving Will to be pinned and speared and prodded with needles held by a stranger's hand.

A thud and crash startle him into dropping the plate. Water and foam splash around the counter and seep into Hannibal's shirt. He would normally dry his hands on the kitchen towel before investigating, but the noise came from the stairway, and the memory of Will's collapse is too fresh to tolerate delays.

He finds Will perfectly upright and well, gingerly making his way down. At the foot of the stairs lies a bare mattress, yellow with disuse. Crooked, it rests with one corner propped against the wall. Will would have likely pushed it to tumble down the stairway ahead of him.

'Found you a bed,' he announces cheerily. 'Help me, won't you?'

Hannibal hauls the mattress to where Will decides he wants it: right in the space cleared out in the middle of the lounge, on the floor amid the dog beds. Buster, who's been napping on the small greenish cushion, lifts his head to sniff at it. He doesn't even need to get up to reach.

'That's good.' Will nods, satisfied. 'But I don't know where the—uh—the—'

'Sheets,' Hannibal supplies hollowly.

'Sheets are. You have to find that.'

Hannibal reminds himself Will has only recently rediscovered how buttons work. It would be wholly unhelpful to undercut his victory in providing sleeping arrangements with pointless talk about human dignity.

‘I will,’ he says. ‘Thank you, Will.’

He leads Will back upstairs after to help him bathe. Will has been getting better at figuring out his hospital robe, but the clothes he is wearing today confuse him and he is unenthusiastic about Hannibal’s attempts to show him how. He rediscovers his sense of initiative after Hannibal has helped him step into the tub and he finds the water tepid for his liking. Once he understands the way the taps work, he wrenches them out of Hannibal’s grip and promptly scalds himself.

‘That’s how I want it,’ he tells Hannibal through gritted teeth.

He washes Will methodically, allowing him to take over where he can easily reach, taking note of the bruise on the left knee—he walked into his hospital bed two days ago—, the fading scratches where the IV sat, the feet swollen with steroids. Once Will starts shivering, he helps him back out again, rubs him dry, sits him in the chair in the corner and runs the warm air from the hairdryer over his skin. Soon, Will’s eyes drift shut; when he hears Hannibal screw open the jar of ointment, he makes only a small grunt of discontent.

Hannibal leaves him to brush his teeth on his own—a recently re-acquired skill—and goes downstairs to find the sheets.

The dogs mill and sniff around him. He relents and makes a detour for the kitchen to give them a snack. His limbs pulse with exhaustion. His head feels stuffed full of cotton. He reminds himself that the Will he has with him today has a unique mind that’s been swept clean, and that in and of itself should make all this effort worthwhile. No, he is not Hannibal’s old Will, but Hannibal’s old Will would not have allowed Hannibal half the things this Will might ultimately allow.

Hannibal knows he is perfectly positioned to safely fill the empty spaces in Will with whatever he chooses. It should be exhilarating to think of.

It *is* exhilarating to think of. But it will be made more so if Will ever deigns to leave the bathroom—whatever is taking him so long?—and give Hannibal a chance to wash and sleep.

As their final act of the day, they sit on the porch and watch the dogs scuffle through their last races. Will is swaddled in his sweater and three blankets, glum and silent. Hannibal fetches him a mint tea and tries to budge the mood with a story like the ones Will enjoyed hearing back at the hospital, but he soon comes to realize that whoever Will was at the hospital, he refuses to be anymore, and the tools in Hannibal’s toolbox are woefully lacking.

‘Why don’t you tell me a story instead?’ he asks at last.

‘I don’t know. Maybe because my brain’s been fried down to the size of a peanut?’

‘Will,’ Hannibal chastises.

‘Fine.’

It’s silent for a while. An owl hoots in the dark, where the porchlight doesn’t reach.

‘There’s a place in the—the woods, where snow never melts. It’s always winter.’

‘Always?’

‘What did I say?’

Hannibal smiles. ‘You said *always*, Will.’

‘Yeah, I *know*.’

Will shifts lower into his chair, features obscured by the steam that rises from his mug.

Hannibal wonders sometimes to what extent Will follows the nuances of storytelling. Does he grasp metaphor well enough to separate fact from fiction, to see through the faerie to the nuggets of truth set into the mould? On the one hand, Hannibal suspects he does just fine: for all that Will struggles, Hannibal knows he often understands more than he is letting on. On the other, Will’s hallucinations persisted for two weeks after he awoke, until finally the swelling around his brain subsided and the epilepsy medication was set at the correct dose; and a man whose own memories elude him, who spends his days chasing after truths once known and beliefs he holds but cannot understand why, a man with an overactive imagination whose reality strikes endlessly surprising—well, that man already straddles the hollow between worlds real and imagined.

‘A place in the woods where snow never melts,’ Hannibal reminds him.

‘It’s cold. Every day, every night.’

‘I imagine.’

‘Don’t be clever,’ Will scolds. ‘Jesus. I said it’s cold. Bright because of the snow. And a man lives there, alone. He feeds off fish, and sometimes he hunts—birds, hare, that sort of—he walks naked, but he doesn’t feel the cold anymore. Sometimes, wayward—wayward—*fuck*—’

He gesticulates with the hand that isn’t holding the mug, and though it’s a mad dash through air more than anything, Hannibal supplies without delay, ‘Children.’

‘Yeah. Children.’

Silence. Will is staring off into space.

Hannibal hums, as though they’ve paused to reflect on the plot so far.

‘Wayward children come across this man, in his snow kingdom?’ he nudges.

Will gives a nod. ‘Right. He makes deals with them: he catches squirrels and rabbits for them to keep as pets, or he gets them holly branches from way up high. But in exchange they have to give up a toy, the sweets from their pocket, a hank of hair.’

‘That seems like a fair trade.’

‘Hm. And then they go. He doesn’t stop them. But one day, a boy comes. He knows about the man in the forest and his parrots—pockets are stuffed full of candy and chocolate coins. All of his best toys too. Because he wants a special thing, a special pet—he wants the man in the forest to gift him a bear.’

‘That is quite the wish.’

‘Yeah. First the man says no. But the boy says that bears aren’t all that big really. A bear is just like a big hare, he tells him, the little liar. So, they go and find a bear, but it won’t be leashed, and it’s a lot bigger than a hare, wouldn’t you know it. It tries to eat the boy.’

‘What does the man do?’

‘He kills the bear. He’s a hunter, isn’t he?’

Hannibal’s hands want to shake, so he folds them into his jacket, crossed at the chest.

‘He kills the bear for the boy,’ Hannibal murmurs. ‘Does he accept the candy in return?’

Will laughs. ‘No. He skins the bear, and he covers himself with the fur, and he saves the bear’s meat and bones and teeth. But the—the—’

A hand over his chest. ‘The heart,’ Hannibal says.

‘The heart. He takes the heart out and he gives it to the boy, and he makes him eat it raw. That’s the deal. The boy has to because—the—knife—and he knows he’ll be next if he doesn’t—so he eats it. There’s blood down his chin, in the snow. His clothes soak in red. And he throws up and again into the bushes, but the man forces him to keep eating. And when it’s all down, he lets him go.’

Will tips his head back, eyes drifting shut. ‘End of story.’

‘I enjoyed that very much.’ The bear tooth he carries in his pocket warms with each breath he takes. ‘I’m curious why that’s the trade. If he usually takes toys or sweets, why does he ask the boy to eat the bear’s heart?’

‘Don’t know,’ Will scoffs, wholly disinterested. ‘Maybe he wants to see him suffer.’

Hannibal cannot be expected to sleep after that.

The mattress digs into his every soft spot. It is almost as though he is lying directly on the floor. The dogs puff their snores around him. The smell itself is enough to keep him awake; he tries pushing his face into the pillow, but the overwhelming scent of lavender fabric conditioner is hardly an improvement. He has placed the mattress so that he might see

through into Will's bedroom, set opposite the open entryway, and now he cannot stop looking at the lumped shape of him under the sheets. He is asleep, of course, and entirely ignorant of Hannibal's torment, but Hannibal cannot help the sense that he is being watched in turn, that he is being *intruded* upon, that it is not safe to shut his eyes for a single moment.

It is deeply irritating. Hannibal is tired. He needs to get up early in the morning to let the dogs out, and after, he gets to do all of this again, and again, and he wants to get up now and drive away and come back *never*.

A little after eleven, Will groans awake and stumbles out of bed. A whine comes from one of the dog beds, but none of the dogs move, used as they are to Will getting up in the night. Hannibal tries pretending for a while that he too can stay under the duvet and leave Will to his escapades, until he hears a thud from the stairway followed by a muffled curse, and has to face the facts.

Will is at the foot of the stairs, groggy and unbalanced with sleep. From the way he's curling and uncurling his toes, Hannibal suspects the thud was the result of a frustrated kick.

'Goddamn fucking—'

'Stairs,' Hannibal rasps obligingly.

'Yeah, what I fucking said.'

On their way up, Will sways like a boat out at storm, and Hannibal has to half-carry him over the steps. Throughout, Will's eyes never open more than half-way. Hannibal hovers as Will relieves himself, concerned he might genuinely doze and fall off the side of the bowl, then tugs him in front of the sink to wash his hands. Will bodily leans against his chest, head lolling on Hannibal's shoulder. His arms are so limp, they would flop uselessly against the porcelain edge if Hannibal weren't holding them.

It's like the night has quietened him. The weight of his body is warm wherever Hannibal touches, his breath on Hannibal's cheek loose and wet.

'We might need to move your bed upstairs,' Hannibal says gently, bracing for resistance. Will seems entirely too content and docile to put up protest, but Will is never what he is supposed to be.

'Shh.' In the mirror, Hannibal catches the moment Will's eyes drift all the way shut. 'It's the middle of the night, no talking. I'm trying to sleep.'

'Will.' Hannibal nudges him a little and presses his thumbs into the meat of his palms for a reaction. 'Don't sleep yet.'

'Hannibal,' Will drawls. Hannibal can see exactly the way the strained muscles in his throat tighten to make the sound. 'This is my house?'

'This is your house, Will.'

‘And I say no talking in the middle of the night. I’m dealing with enough shit already. Alright?’

‘Alright, W—’

Will’s right hand is wet enough to easily slip from his grasp, and it now slaps an uncoordinated finger over Hannibal’s lips, missing his eye by millimetres.

Hannibal tastes soap.

‘Good night,’ Will announces, body sagging. Hannibal has to release his other hand and clutch at him for balance.

When they’re steady again, he tucks his nose in where Will’s hair grows a little too long. He smells sweat, muskier and saltier now that all traces of fever are gone, and he smells camomile shower gel and lavender fabric conditioner.

He doesn’t try to talk again. Their breaths whistle through the silence in unison. He is holding Will, *this* Will, here and now. And with time, perhaps Hannibal can find his way to that Other Will too, to the nebulous knot of more, burning with sharp feeling somewhere out in the snow, and perhaps he can bring him home—but this time leashed, claimed, safe.

Once he has put Will back to bed, he pushes Buster off his lumpy mattress, yanks the duvet over himself until he is wrapped in tight, and falls asleep before he remembers how.

Chapter End Notes

What do we think about Will's creative solution to the *there was only one bed* dilemma?

Next time, everyone is settling into their routines. It goes fine until it doesn't. Also, Bedelia makes a reappearance.

Thank you to all those reading and leaving kudos!

The Doll

Chapter Summary

A visit to the Baltimore house goes wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nine: The Doll.

When the chair swallows him, when the cushion folds around the shape of his back like it knows him, when he finds the coffee table at the perfect distance for him to cross his legs without trouble, Hannibal realizes less time has passed than he feels.

‘I would like to extend an apology,’ he begins once Bedelia has sat back down. Her wine shifts precariously close to the rim of the glass, then settles. He isn’t partaking today: he can’t stay long and he has to drive back to Wolf Trap straight after. ‘This past month was a busy time for me.’

‘You don’t owe me an apology for cancelling sessions, Hannibal. They are here to help you—which they cannot do if you miss them.’

Hannibal knows. The knot of tension in his stomach needs untangling, and it has gone ignored for too long. But he doesn’t have the *time.*

‘I’m afraid I cannot promise that I’ll be able to attend regular sessions for some time yet,’ he says. ‘Commute is a substantial time commitment now that I am no longer based in Baltimore and Will requires round-the-clock care. I am uncomfortable with the idea of leaving him with a stranger.’

Bedelia raises an eyebrow. ‘The last time we spoke, you informed me your relationship with Will Graham was untenable and vowed to never see him again.’

‘I have re-evaluated.’

‘Clearly.’

Hannibal flicks a piece of link off the cuff of his jacket.

‘You said Will Graham required round-the-clock care. How has that been?’

‘Challenging.’

‘That can’t have come as a surprise.’

‘More challenging than I anticipated,’ Hannibal amends. ‘But it is rewarding to be of service. And where I couldn’t have maintained a relationship with Will before, the circumstances now are such that he no longer presents a threat.’

Bedelia takes a sip of her wine. It’s a white, most likely a Pinot Grigio—her favourite. ‘And what happens to Will Graham,’ she asks, ‘when you realize that is not enough?’

The knot moves from Hannibal’s stomach into his lungs.

‘I have great faith in Will’s recovery.’

‘I cannot make judgements on this matter, Hannibal. I know there are aspects to your experience with Will Graham that you have not shared.’ Bedelia gives a sigh, just the slightest rise and fall of her chest. ‘But by my understanding, he will become a threat again the moment he recovers. Is that accurate?’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal allows, ‘but he is highly unlikely to recover to the extent where this would become an issue. His grasp of cause and consequence remains flimsy, and while he may grow to regain many of his memories, at this stage the chances that he will confidently recall the period preceding his illness are slight.’

‘Then you are acting on the supposition that he will improve just enough, but no more than. You’re tightrope-walking, Hannibal.’

Hannibal doesn’t care to engage with that.

‘Will has the capacity to surprise me,’ he averts. ‘I admit to being curious.’

‘You have been curious before. I have never known your curiosity to be so blindly self-destructive.’

Hannibal thinks about the words on the way back to Wolf Trap, and consequently forgets entirely to drop by his house. He was to fetch more winter clothing and a pair of new slippers: the bare floors of Will’s home get awfully cold anytime the temperature drops, and Hannibal’s previous slippers met their untimely end between Buster’s teeth. One shoe, they still cannot find; Hannibal privately worries if the little menace hasn’t swallowed it.

Is he being self-destructive? He recognizes that he cannot always tell. There is pleasure in disassembling a construction, in peeling off strips of skin around a cut until you reach blushing flesh; is that what he’s feeling these days, a pleasure in a risky game of self-torment? If it is that, then he’s hardly breaking even: flashes of excitement rarely push through the haze of routine exhaustion, and the heady weariness of every grey morning settles into aches in Hannibal’s neck, shoulders, back, until he is too stiff for joy.

Lana reaches him first when he steps outside the car. She sets immediately to licking at his shoes until they are clean of mud and perfectly sticky. Hannibal can never determine if she is happy to see him or merely happy to see his shoes.

The rest of the dogs follow in close proximity, except Buster, who lies in Will's lap and regards Hannibal with open hostility, and Winston, sat by Alana's side. He's the most dignified of the lot, and though he is often content to ignore him entirely, he is privately Hannibal's favourite. Unlike the clumsy, artless mutts Will usually rescues off roads, Winston has a grace to him that reminds Hannibal of the hounds his parents kept. Too bad Buster is the one with the hunter's instincts.

Will watches him climb up the porch steps, expressionless, until Hannibal draws to a halt to stand before him. He feels as though he is being inspected: Will's eyes snag on every button, every cuff, every stray hair. It is unnerving. He battles the itch urging him to pull his shoulders and shuffle his feet. He reaches instead for the distraction of inspecting Will back: his hair curled tighter than usual with the day's humidity, his eyes light in the sun, a speck of sauce from the lunch Hannibal left for them dried into the fabric of his T-shirt.

Finally, Will gives a nod, satisfied. 'You were gone a while,' he says.

As he does, his brow furrows a fraction: he isn't sure how accurate the statement is. Hannibal glances at his watch.

'Three hours forty-seven minutes,' he confirms. 'That is a while.'

'Well, we had a great time,' Alana says, smiling at him from the rocking chair. 'We had lunch, we played with the dogs for a while, and then Will offered me some coffee.'

There's a wetness on her nose and the tips of her hair that looks like dew. She radiates easy pleasure—*that* is not what Hannibal has been feeling, is it?

'Oh, right,' Will remembers. 'I made coffee. In the—thing.'

Hannibal looks to him sharply. 'You made coffee in the moka pot?'

Will grabs his mug off the table and pushes it at Hannibal so he may verify for himself.

He takes an experimental sip. The coffee's long gone cold and Hannibal finds it a little bitter for his liking, but it is undeniably coffee, and undeniably well-brewed.

Will grins, entirely pleased with himself, which Hannibal cannot fault. He needs careful instruction to follow any unfamiliar process, and often jots down the steps required to do things like boiling the kettle, feeding the dogs or washing his hair, on post-it notes that now litter every room—and Hannibal has not once attempted to teach him how to use the moka pot, though he supposes he hasn't made a secret of it.

A swell of shared pride blooms between them; and with it, an eager hope.

'Finish it,' Will waves him off when Hannibal makes to return the mug. He's busy digging himself under his blanket.

'I thought you might make me another,' Hannibal prompts, both because he would enjoy such an offering to mark the occasion and because he can think of little less pleasant than forcing himself to finish the bitter, lukewarm coffee.

‘No, I’m tired now.’

Hannibal finishes the coffee.

‘Alright, I’ll get going.’ Alana stands, gathering up her mug. ‘Let me just wash this quickly —’

‘Please, there’s no need,’ Hannibal interjects quickly.

‘He’ll do it,’ Will says.

Alana’s mouth quirks halfway into a smile before a thought sets her shoulders tense again. ‘Hannibal, I’ve left you a note on the desk in the study. They all come highly recommended.’

‘Thank you. I’ll have a look tonight.’

‘Hannibal.’

She waits until he meets her gaze: a cheap ploy to catch him in a lie. It’s almost charming enough to pierce through his mounting irritation.

‘Please give someone a call tonight,’ she says. ‘It could be part-time at first. Will and I talked about it today and he agreed that you needed a break.’

Fury leaps up Hannibal’s throat. He swallows.

‘Did he?’ he asks evenly. ‘Or did you prod him until he told you what you wanted to hear?’

‘I am not *manipulating* him!’

‘Not maliciously,’ Hannibal acknowledges. ‘Only for my own good.’

Alana snags her bag from where it sits at the foot of her chair, startling Zoe and Lana into scuttering down the porch and hiding behind Hannibal’s car.

‘This isn’t healthy, Hannibal. For either of you. Once you’re ready to acknowledge that, give me a call.’

She turns to Will, who appears completely indifferent to the argument. ‘Thank you for the coffee, Will. I can come by again soon?’

‘Sure,’ Will agrees easily.

‘Thank you for coming,’ Hannibal forces through a tight throat.

Alana tosses him one final look of pity, then packs herself into her car.

‘Dogs, Will.’

Will gives an ear-piercing whistle. Zoe and Lana burst out from behind the Bentley and allow themselves to be corralled safely onto the porch. Their noses and ears twitch as they watch

Alana drive away.

Hannibal goes in to wash the mugs. Will's coffee-making adventures have left the kitchen a thorough mess, but the well-practiced motions of tidying and wiping ease his frustration, and by the end of it he is even able to go into Will's study and glance at the names and numbers Alana has left.

He knows he should call. To relinquish Will to a stranger would mean moving out, back to Baltimore, into a space where he can breathe freely, into rooms empty enough to hold him. He could take on a few patients, he could take a night off and go to the theatre, he could take a new victim. He would still be able to see Will, if less; he would still have opportunities to exert his influence, to work at chiselling him into a vessel that might one day bind a hunter of bears and arrogant children.

He folds the note in half and puts it in the drawer.

'She's right, you know.'

Hannibal doesn't look up. The air shifts into him as Will sets his hands to the desk and leans forward.

'Don't you have anything better to be doing with your life? I don't know, your fake doctor job?'

Hannibal's lips tug upward. '*Psychiatrist* will be the word you're looking for.'

'That's exactly what I said.'

Hannibal looks up at him. 'You taught criminal psychology, Will. I am not sure you are in any position to be making this joke.'

'I have zero memory of that.'

'I see,' Hannibal says, thinking that what he needs is a quick change of topic. 'If you have the time, would you please inquire with Buster about my missing shoe?'

Will sighs dramatically and sags into the armchair, pulling the blanket he's carried in from the porch tightly around his frame. The weather today is pleasant, but a cold spell is well on its way, and from the way Will stretches and winces it seems that his bones know it.

'You should have fought harder for it,' he chastises. 'There's nothing I can do now. Survival of the fittest is law in this house.'

'That's a shame.'

'Weren't you supposed to get new ones from—the—'

'Baltimore. I forgot.'

Will's brows ride up his forehead until they've all the way disappeared under his bangs. 'You *forgot.* Hell. Didn't know this shit was contagious.'

Hannibal hums. He's trying to determine how much longer he has before the temperatures drop from low to freezing, but his phone is resolved that he's better off viewing advertisements instead.

'Let's go now.'

'Hm?'

'I said let's go—Hannibal.'

Hannibal's head jerks up.

'I said let's go now. Ish. I'm taking a nap first.'

'You'd like to go to Baltimore?'

Will shrugs. He's avoiding Hannibal's eye. 'What, like I have something better to do?'

Hannibal considers him. The last thing he fancies now is driving the hour and a half back into Baltimore, and then out again just in time for peak traffic, only to get a pair of slippers he will be perfectly fine going without. But Will has not expressed a desire to leave Wolf Trap even once, not to the market, not on a casual drive, not to a coffee shop—not even to see Abigail. That he is eager to do so now testifies to the effect of the moka pot victory. If Will is feeling confident, Hannibal is hardly going to stand in his way.

They do go. The lights of the car glide on the water gathered in the air. The windows cloud over quickly. Will is only half-awake after the nap that's stretched well into the afternoon, and dozes in the passenger's seat with his head pressed up against the windowpane. When he straightens briefly to pull Hannibal's coat higher up his chest, there is a pink circle just above his brow, where the cold glass has pressed.

The door screeches open into the stale smell of dust and disuse. Tomorrow, it will have been three weeks since Hannibal last stood in his own hallway. He'd like to stay long enough to vacuum, to cook, to busy around until the smell of empty space dissipates into an array of familiar scents: basil, thyme, ginger, burning wood, pomegranate dish-soap.

He finds it unlikely that he will be allowed such a thing. He fully expects Will to turn around and demand they go home, and blame Hannibal for forcing him into taking the trip in the first place: reality is only the mould from which Will excavates his truths. There is already a tremor to his hands, and he refuses to take his jacket off; but when Hannibal encourages him to step further into the house, he conforms, fingers trailing over the wall like he's marking his path into the labyrinth.

Hannibal leads him to the study, to the garden, into the kitchen and the dining room. Throughout, he reminds him softly, 'This is where I sit in the evenings. This is where I prepare meals. This is where I dine. You've had dinner with me here a few times. You

watched me cook as you had your wine. You only stayed after for a drink once, and you sat as close to the fire as you dared. Do you remember, Will?'

And Will mutters, 'Some,' and Hannibal thinks that they will never dine like that again.

Will struggles with the stairs up, unused to the height of the steps and disoriented, but smacks Hannibal away with an audible growl when he attempts to help.

Will has never seen the upstairs of the house before. Hannibal doesn't care for showing it to him now, when he is already annoyed with the amount of novelty he's been subjected to. Hannibal can tell it colours his perception—his eyes glaze over the paintings like they're not worth his time, his brow furrows at the sight of the armour guarding Hannibal's bedroom, and he stares critically at the large shower cabin before dismissing it from his mind. Will's house in Wolf Trap envelops, every room a tone that resonates clearly with the timbre of who Will is, or used to be. Hannibal's spaces suddenly feel to him clunky, awkward, and entirely off-note.

He slides the wardrobe open and shifts his focus onto producing the required pieces of clothing, hoping to stave the discomfiture from showing on his face. He sets a pair of slippers onto the bed, a warm winter sweater, a pair of pyjama bottoms in thick cotton.

Will hasn't moved from the doorway, where he's watching Hannibal impassively like a spiritless guard.

'I want jello,' he proclaims suddenly. 'You don't have any, do you?'

'No,' Hannibal says, silently praying for patience. It would come easier if Will weren't clearly trying for an argument.

'Of course not.' A huff. 'Can you get me some?'

'We can stop by a supermarket on our way back.'

Will grimaces. 'I'm not going into a supermarket, Hannibal.'

'You can wait in the car if you prefer.'

'I want it now. I'm hungry.'

Hannibal sighs. He briefly considers calling Will out on this put-upon childishness, an act which Hannibal might have bought if he hadn't spent the last two months living and breathing Will's moods—but he quickly decides it would only exacerbate the issue. 'Let me make you some proper food then,' he offers. 'I have plenty to choose from in the pantry.'

'Do you have raspberry jello?'

'No, Will, I don't have raspberry jello.'

'No. Which we've established. I'm not eating your food.'

Hannibal knows he will break. He knows he *should* break, because there is generally little benefit to denying Will his whimsy, and in the end what else does Hannibal have to do? He'd like to fill the house with smells of cooking, he'd like to serve Will his meal from a beautiful dish and pour him wine until he is red-cheeked and breathing shallowly—until he speaks of dark, unfathomable things that he hides away from daylight. But it won't happen this way. Hannibal is instead going to drive out to buy Will his jello, which he'll never finish, and then he'll grow groggy with the aftereffects of adventure and they'll drive back to Wolf Trap, into the blistering cold that crawls up the creaks between the floorboards, and they'll do meds and dogs and shower and sleep—and wake up at least four times during the night, shivering or angry or terrified—and the air will smell of dog breath, mud and lavender, while Hannibal's home will smell of nothing at all.

'Fine,' Will barks. 'I'll go get it myself. I'm getting a cab. Give me your phone.'

Hannibal passes it to him.

Will jabs his finger into the screen a few times, then stops. He stares, unblinking, until his eyes grow wet with exertion.

'Will?'

'I don't know how,' Will whispers.

Hannibal eases the phone out of his hand. 'There's no point in taking a cab when we have a car. I'll go get it now. Did you want anything else, or just raspberry jello?'

Will shrugs. He's still staring at the point in space where he's held Hannibal's phone.

'Will you call me if you remember anything else? Do you know where your phone is?'

There is no answer. Hannibal clicks open the button in the right-side pocket of Will's jacket. 'It's here in your jacket, Will.'

'Oh,' Will says weakly. 'Right.'

'Where would you like to wait? In the study downstairs? There's a sofa if you'd like to rest for a while.'

'No, uhm—kitchen.'

'In the kitchen. Alright.'

It takes so little time in the end to get Will his jello, Hannibal struggles to understand why he allowed them to spend so long arguing about it. Though crisis has been averted, though he is on his way back to Will right now, he feels nevertheless that a cog has missed a tooth, and the day is fast spinning out of control.

He is not wrong.

He finds Will in the kitchen where he left him. Like a pillar, he stands in the centre of the room, with his head down and his eyes screwed shut against silent tears. Around him, the world has fractured and burst: cutlery glints silver on the floor and the counters, and drawers ripped from the cupboards rest in heaps at Will's feet. Shards of glass and porcelain strew the floor. The cupboards above the sink and cooker have been torn open, and the cups and dishes have been excavated to meet their deaths on the tiled floor. The plastic panels from the fridge and freezer lie cracked or broken across the room, trailing thawing produce and meat, spreads of conserves and the slush of melting ice.

Will's fingers are still twitching with unspent fury.

It will take a full day to clean the room; it will take weeks to replace all that was lost. Hannibal's lungs tighten with it, but already a part of him resigns itself to feeling nothing: what difference does it make if his kitchen is unusable when he is never here to use it? When he has been torn out of his own home by Will's claws?

Will isn't wearing shoes, Hannibal realizes. He must have succumbed to tiredness and given the sofa a chance, before a spike of restless anger claimed his body for his own.

He follows his own path out to the hallway, where he unearths a pair of thick-soled wellington boots from the back of a closet.

As best he can, he steps around the debris of his old sanctuary, until he reaches Will and snakes an arm around his frame, helping first one and then the other foot into the shoe. He fully expects a fight—unless the night is deep and Will's thinking compromised, he doesn't allow Hannibal to touch him without a fight first—but he finds him loose like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

'What happened, Will?' he asks as simply as he can.

Will says nothing.

'Some trouble controlling your anger is a common long-term effect of encephalitis,' he reminds him. 'Your doctor explained this to you, do you remember?'

Will nods. Hannibal decides to allow him his silence, though he is determined to get an answer out of him eventually—Will is often snappish and impatient, but only as much as Hannibal might expect from a frustrated patient, and he has never shown signs of impaired anger management before. He'll have to get in touch with Will's neurologist in case there is something else wrong: the outburst strikes Hannibal as entirely incongruous with his usual sweetness.

He takes him into the study, sits him on the sofa, then changes the boots into his usual shoes. He lacks the energy to do much about the kitchen, but he at least gathers up the food pulled from the fridge and stuffs it into a trash bag. He sets it by the door to take out with them.

Will is rubbing at his eyes when he returns to check on him. He again refuses to answer Hannibal's echoed inquiry.

‘Would you like to go home,’ Hannibal asks instead, ‘or would you like to have your jello first?’

At this, Will laughs.

‘No,’ he says, ‘I don’t want my fucking jello, Hannibal.’

It’s the last thing he says to Hannibal that day.

The drive back through traffic is long and arduous. Dinner is rejected in its entirety. Injections, which have never become easy but have lately turned into quieter affairs, take nearly an hour to get done today, and cause in Will a panic attack that nothing, not the dogs nor promises nor bribery, will ease. Eventually, Hannibal has had enough, and pins him to the bed with his whole weight like he’s subduing prey. Will screams at him in a primal, horrible way; the dogs erupt in a concert of frenetic fear. The needle goes in and out and the torture cuts off a few seconds later, but Hannibal’s hands burn with it for hours, in what’s half-pain, half-yearning.

He leaves Will alone to gather up his dignity and lets the dogs out on his own. He washes, he dresses in his cotton pyjamas and his new slippers, he puts away the leftovers and tries to stop himself mentally adding up Will’s calorie intake for the day. When he checks on Will, he finds him asleep in a ball of sheets. He tugs the duvet over him. His fingers brush Will’s shoulder; even in sleep, he jerks away.

Hannibal leaves him his jello on the bedside table in case he wakes hungry in the night.

On his mattress, fingers of cold slipping between the floorboards and tightening around the flimsy bedding, Hannibal lies staring at the ceiling, holding his bear tusk talisman in a tight grip over his chest. The chill has taken this small comfort from him, too: the tooth no longer emanates the warmth that kept Hannibal company through the last cold spell.

Good, he thinks. It shouldn’t. There is no Other Will. If there ever were, Hannibal tore him from within Will and left him to shatter and die on the floor, and he is left now with a hollowed doll, capable of token protest but ultimately loose-limbed under Hannibal’s hands, easy to arrange into any position he wishes—just not any of those he’d like.

That’s it. This is what Hannibal has left, and he will never have more; and though he secretly suspects that this would have been true no matter what he did, that the Other Will has never existed at all, that none of it has ever been possible outside the realm of mirage—even still, Hannibal feels abandoned.

For one minute and twenty-five seconds, he cries ugly, exhausted tears into the back of his hand that stifles the sound well enough not to rouse Will. The dogs notice and huff about him curiously for a while. Lana licks the salt off his face, which either makes Hannibal laugh or cry more, he’s not quite sure.

Then, he gets up, washes his face, and sleeps, again, like he did last night, and like he will the night after.

Chapter End Notes

A big chapter next time that'll shake things up a little for these two!

The Intruder

Chapter Summary

Will decides what they both need is alcohol. Hannibal receives a curious text.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ten: The Intruder.

The plan is perfectly simple: Alana arrives at nine a.m. and Hannibal leaves at ten past. She makes sure Will eats, dresses, brushes his teeth, takes care of the dogs. She drives him to his doctor's appointment at twelve-thirty and braves through Will's endless grumbling about not needing speech therapy and feeling entirely at peace with the concept of death via choking on his food, *yes, Hannibal, I do mean that.*

In the meantime, Hannibal gets to see two patients, take a coffee alone in his own office, and maybe get some fresh produce from his favourite farmers' market. The hours stretch before him in all their possibilities. He doesn't even have to go to the market if he doesn't wish it. He can have wine if he prefers. He could even cancel the therapy sessions if he so pleased. The only thing he absolutely must do is pick Will up from the doctor's at half past one.

Things do not go according to plan.

First, Will decides he does not care to get out of bed, and Hannibal decides he does not care for Alana helping Will dress. He spends a quarter of an hour coaxing him into a sitting position so he may begin to pull on his shirt, only to have Will inform him he's perfectly capable of dressing himself but make no move to actually do so. Hannibal burns breakfast.

By the time Alana's car pulls up at five past nine, there is no food, Will is still asleep, Buster has dragged what appears to be a rat's carcass into the house, and Hannibal is halfway through a shave, undressed and late.

He leaves twenty minutes behind schedule, reassured by Alana that they'll be fine. The two of them being fine is the last thing Hannibal wants. Will doesn't reassure him of anything. Since the kitchen incident, silence has been his primary tool in fending off Hannibal's questions, requests, offers—Hannibal's any and all attempts at conversation. He argues less and he demands less, succumbed instead to a passive quiet that permeates the house, weighs down limbs, ruins the flavours of dishes and disturbs the dogs' sleep.

His first patient today is Miss Henrietta Anderson. She doesn't ignore Hannibal, which in itself is an improvement, and briefly his mood improves. But once the door has shut behind her, he makes the mistake of checking his phone. The message from Alana details how well

everything is going on her end. Apparently, Will has dressed and helped her make breakfast, Buster and the carcass have been intercepted, and Will seems in high spirits. Hannibal entertains the thought of killing them both.

Franklyn is late to his appointment. The time Hannibal was supposed to spend strolling down farmers' market is dedicated instead to striding circles around his office, wiping surfaces, gazing out windows, and reading passages from old patient notes in a futile effort not to think about what's happening in Wolf Trap in his absence.

Franklyn's sessions struggle to maintain Hannibal's interest at the best of times. Today is a lost cause. He could not repeat a single sentiment that Franklyn expresses. He thinks instead of the best route to take coming down to D.C. once he has picked Will up; he thinks too of whether it is at all likely that Will might suffer from another burst of uncontrollable anger and claw Alana's eyes out.

It is ten past one when he finally gets in the car, and it is then also that his phone buzzes. He palms at his coat with one hand as the other pulls the belt buckle, expecting an angry text from Will—but the message he sees is from an unknown number, and it is two words only.

I know

For a single moment, Hannibal can see and hear nothing.

He runs the number into the browser, unsurprised when it returns no helpful results.

What do you know?

What you did

Hannibal draws a breath. *I'm afraid you will have to be more specific,* he types.

I know most of it

Blood is pumping fast between his ears, thudding brightly into the skull.

Meanwhile, I don't even know your name.

Thought it was your pet braincase that had the amnesia

Hannibal feels a flare of offense at the wording, but it's impossible to hold onto when the next message arrives on the heels of the previous,

Why haven't you killed Dr Sutcliffe yet? Big wide track left uncovered there

His fingers tighten on the edge of the phone. It is fifteen past. He is already late.

I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else, he writes. *I do not wish Dr Sutcliffe any harm.*

The answer is immediate; whoever it is that's typing, they must be stumbling over their own fingers.

I do

Hannibal shouldn't, but it is impossible to resist. *Then perhaps you ought to do something about it.*

He waits.

Fine. And then, *Lazy ass.*

Who is it? Who could it possibly be if not—

Hannibal puts the phone away. His hands are steady on the wheel. He cannot think about this now; he must drive. It is a good thing he must drive.

When he arrives, he finds Will sitting in the waiting room, eyes closed and face slack. He doesn't dare touch him, so he stands above and murmurs his name, and once more, until he is furiously blinking sleep away.

'Time?' he grumbles.

'Quarter to two.'

'What time were you supposed to be here?'

'Half past one.'

Will throws him a meaningful look. Hannibal dips his head in a silent admission of guilt.

'They're learning how to read the time in group next week,' Will tells him, though how he would know this, Hannibal cannot say: he has steadfastly refused to do any form of occupational therapy. 'Something about big hand little hand. I should bring you along.'

Hannibal helps him into his jacket, then pulls the winter cap tight over his ears. The last few days have been the coldest yet, and he hasn't been able to find a parking spot near the door.

'How was therapy?'

'Time of my life. Come on, I'm hungry.'

Hannibal looks at him curiously. Unless he's got a specific craving, Will rarely expresses any desire to eat. 'Alana said you had eggs for breakfast.'

'Am I only allowed one meal a day now?' Will pushes past him to get to the door out. 'Didn't eat a lot. Eggs were too salty.'

Hannibal revels in this vindication for as long as it takes them to drive back to Wolf Trap.

Will passes the rest of the day in an improved mood. Though he still keeps to himself, he replies to Hannibal's queries, and instead of lounging in bed he spends much of his time tending to the dogs. Even a few days ago he would have refused to see to them, preferring to send Hannibal out for long lonely treks across the woods; today, it seems as though he is again moving toward the light.

Or perhaps Will isn't much different. Perhaps the change is in Hannibal and in the thrum of fantastical, ridiculous, exhilarating hope in his chest.

Thrice over the course of the day, he escapes into the bathroom, presses his back against the door, and checks his messages. He knows none more arrive—he would have felt the buzz of each where the phone rests against his thigh. But the excitement at seeing them still there, still real, does not die down with repetition; if anything, it grows.

It isn't *him*. Of course it isn't; but who else could it be? Who might know enough of Hannibal's secrets to make sweeping statements of accusation, and enough about his personal life to recognize Donald Sutcliffe's involvement in obscuring Will's diagnosis? Bedelia is intelligent enough to connect most dots, but she lacks the initiative to be so bold. Abigail's age might lend itself to a bout of poor judgement, but she is too invested in survival to act so foolish. Jack Crawford would have sent snipers into Wolf Trap if he knew anything at all, not tease Hannibal over text message.

It isn't him. It isn't.

In the evening, Will wanders into the kitchen while Hannibal is doing the dishes. He watches him in silence for a while, then says,

'We should get drunk.'

It is a poor idea for a variety of reasons. Hannibal cannot find it in himself to care: he hasn't had a single drop of alcohol in a month now, and it's been the longest month of his life, and his mind is threaded through with mist in a way he doesn't like. Alcohol would help him like it. It might also help him smooth over the edges of the shard that's being pulled deeper and deeper into his heart with every minute he's not checking his phone.

The floors are viciously cold and the radiator will not go higher. Hannibal gathers every blanket he can find in the house and stacks them onto Will's bed. Then, he pours out the bottle of rum Will has dug out from under a stack of sheet music on the bookcase, and brews two white chocolates, rich and strong and *hot.*

When he carries the mugs into the bedroom, he finds Will sat cross-legged on the bed, two crystal-cut glasses balanced precariously on an encyclopaedia volume, and a bottle of amber liquid currently in the process of being unscrewed.

'Will,' he protests, but then Will is already pouring out the whisky until the glasses cannot take any more. Translucent gold spills past the brim.

'I said *drunk.*'

‘You’re on a heady mix of medication. I assure you, you *will* get drunk.’

‘But you won’t. Do you like whisky?’

‘Not particularly.’

Will pushes the glass into his face. The only reason Hannibal takes it is because he is sure the whole thing will spill if he does not.

‘Drink it quickly then,’ he instructs. ‘Kill the taste after.’

Hannibal sighs, perches on the edge of the bed, and drinks.

Half an hour later, he is on the bed fully, collar wrenched open, socks discarded and his subsequent glass of whisky overflowing with slow-melting ice. Still, when he rests his forehead on his knee for a while, he feels the red of his face hum fast and hot into the fabric.

Will reclines against the headboard, leisurely and graceful as a cat in the sun. He nurses the mug of chocolate on his stomach, content to hold it more than he does drink it. His cheeks are flushed pink.

His lips are crowned in cream.

‘Comfortable?’ he asks, which is when Hannibal realizes he hasn’t moved his head from where he put it against the knee, only shifted so he could regard Will. The world is tilted sideways, and the knee is the one thing holding him upright.

‘Hm,’ he confirms, satisfied when the crust over Will’s lips cracks as he smiles.

‘Have I seen you drunk before?’ He dips his head until his ear is almost at the shoulder. There’s a brightness in his eyes that’s maybe alcohol, maybe laughter.

Hannibal tries to shake his head without dislodging his forehead from the knee. ‘My tolerance is usually higher,’ he says. ‘I must be tired.’

‘Oh, I’ve been told.’

‘By Alana?’

‘Yep. I don’t understand her—her—her what?’

‘Meddling.’

Will’s teeth flash in a grin. ‘No, Hannibal. The—she doesn’t—persistence. Is that a word?’

‘Persistence,’ Hannibal samples it. ‘Yes.’

‘Yeah,’ Will worries his lip between his teeth, consumed by a thought. Hannibal tries to adjust on the bed, only to find he is now on his stomach. He lifts himself bodily off the

mattress to reach for the glass—the whisky tastes horribly bitter and uninspired, but he's *so* thirsty.

'Or—did you sleep with her?'

'Yes,' Hannibal admits easily. 'The night before you were admitted to the hospital.'

A grimace. Will's foot rests on the mattress just below Hannibal's point of suspension. If he slackened the muscles in his arms, he would tumble face-first onto the pointed toes.

'Did I sleep with her?'

Hannibal doesn't think so, though he imagines if Will had, he might have kept it a secret.

'No,' he declares in a tone that's intended as firm but comes out odd.

He wonders whether Will is going to ask another question. He does not.

'Well,' he sighs instead, flexing the toes in his foot as he stretches. 'She's definitely not sleeping with you again.'

Hannibal is fairly sure this is accurate. 'Is my conflict with Alana upsetting you?'

Will snorts. 'I don't give a shit.'

Hannibal's forehead is somehow resting against the mattress now, and he grins into the duvet. He can feel Will's foot at the side of his head, pressing closer and further, like he's curling his toes in rhythm with Hannibal's breath.

'Pass me that blanket.'

Hannibal reaches behind himself without looking. He palms at the nest until he produces what Will has requested. Fluff from the polyester lining lingers between his fingers even as he lets go; he'll need to look into purchasing Will a new set.

Will wears a set of blankets already atop the cotton sweater Hannibal got him for Christmas, but he runs cold easily, and he is not as drunk. The blanket is thrown over his legs, covering Hannibal's head in the process: in the cocoon that results, the rest of the world is kept off, and the stale smell of dog, neglected washes, Will's sweat and the alcohol on Hannibal's own breath all swirl and blend in his nostrils, up into his head, until they are all he knows.

Outside, it is supposedly beginning to snow. Wind rattles the shutters and whistles through Wolf Trap's cavernous fields. Somewhere out there is the author of those audacious messages, destitute in the cold, denied entrance into their refuge. Hannibal imagines him now: black eyes brimming with resentment, mouth twisted cruelly around a curse, dark locks tossed by wind and the fight that churns in him even when he's standing still.

He would arrive clad in furs, stuck with crusted blood. He would knock the door down, or he would burst through the window—the glass in the windows is so dainty that it cannot keep out the cold, never mind a determined intruder—and he would take the peace Hannibal feels

and crush it in his hand. The bedroom would flow with blood, the blankets would drink it until they are full. Would the dogs bark madly, or would they recognize his scent? Would Will scream and flail like he does under Hannibal's hand, or would his eyes close, his body slacken, until the porcelain showed through skin and he dropped over the bed like a doll?

The first time he imagines it, he is himself a flash of fury and teeth: he rips into the Other Will's throat to watch him drown on his own blood, protecting that which is rightfully his, proving himself the superior hunter.

The second time, he stands and watches the Other Will stuff himself full on his destruction, and then he sits back and waits—for whatever it is that comes next.

He can't tell which makes him burn more, but he does know this: the warmth of Will's ankle by the side of his cheek, the pull in his stomach every time the mattress shifts with Will's weight, the dogs' snores and the blizzard raging outside—they are made all the sweeter for knowing they could be torn apart in another's teeth.

Maybe it is the alcohol or maybe it is Will's improved mood, but he wakes Hannibal only once in the night, just after midnight, and he allows Hannibal's hands to wrap around his waist when he guides him over the steps.

Morning pools crisp and too bright, through windows still standing whole.

Hannibal's head pounds. He is fairly sure he cannot hear out of his left ear. The dogs are whining and scratching at the door, but that is distinctly far away.

There's a groan from Will's bed. Hannibal pulls himself straight and stumbles to let out the beasts.

The sun scatters and magnifies on the mounts of snow outside, and when it reaches Hannibal's eyes, he recoils away on instinct. There's a chuckle from Will's bed, where only one eye is visible, peeking from beneath his five blankets.

Hannibal sets about making breakfast in a mood that isn't poor, exactly, but limited: thoughts and impressions are kept at a distance to make room for the ringing in his forehead and the burn of his eyes. Then, Will hobbles into the kitchen, looking equally battered by their evening but clearly trained into forbearance, and he brews himself a cup of black coffee so potent that the smell alone loosens one of the many knots in Hannibal's frontal lobe—and then he brews another one for Hannibal, strong and hot and sweetened with just the right amount of milk.

Hannibal halts all breakfast preparations to partake in this new indulgence, and after that he discovers a previously untapped resource of energy. He makes eggs, he makes pancakes, he makes a cucumber salad and toast and sausage, and he peels and cuts up fruit.

It is much too cold to take breakfast out on the porch, but the cool scent of the air slithers into the house through every crevice. When they sit by the wide window with a good view of the snow-lain driveway, it is almost as though they are feasting among the snow. Frost colours their breaths and their cheeks. Will must have tossed in the night without Hannibal hearing,

because his hair is mad and untamed like an animal's. He huffs a laugh as his fingers, stiff from the cold, burn when he tries to grab the pancake from the top of the stack.

Hannibal pinches the pancake between his knife and fork to move onto Will's plate. Buster is actively trying to solicit him for scraps, his usual distrust tucked away in light of opportunity —he is aware that whining to Will is a losing game, though he seems to not have grasped that neither can Hannibal give him what he wants, as long as Will is looking.

Their knees brush together under the table. When the cold light hits just right, the window grilles crosshatch shadows on Will's face, and Hannibal is struck with an impossible thought —hope—wish.

What if it had been Will—no ominous Other Will from another realm, but this Will, his Will —that sent him the messages yesterday?

He did not. Even if he'd recalled the period preceding his illness and lied about it, even if he'd remembered Donald Sutcliffe's name, even if were capable of making such a connection, even if—where would he have acquired a phone that Hannibal did not know about? How would he have verified Donald's circumstances? More importantly, why would he ever do such a thing—but show no other signs of distress, beyond the usual?

It cannot have been his Will. His Will lacks both the material and mental resources necessary for this brash, rude, presumptuous thing. But Hannibal *wants* it to have been him: if it is not, then there is a third entity in the room with them, there is a spare cog in the carefully constructed mechanisms of their everyday. There is an intruder in the house though they cannot see him—and Will is not *it.*

Only now, as the light hits just right, the jam jar and Buster at his feet and Will's creased brow when a bite of his pancake drops from his fork and onto the wood—now, Hannibal feels as though what cannot be true is true, and he struggles to convince himself otherwise.

His phone buzzes. He hides the smile at the irony of it and sets it to the table to look, expecting a text from Alana, or a patient—

Taking your doctor friend for a drive.

Fury swells in Hannibal's stomach. It rises into his lungs, clouds his vision. The pounding in his head shifts to a new pitch. *Intruder*, it is saying.

Intruder.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, Hannibal attempts to deal with a threat he doesn't understand, and Beverly makes a reappearance.

A huge thank you to all those reading and commenting!

The Body

Chapter Summary

Hannibal ventures out into the snow to capture himself an intruder. Beverly has thoughts she'd like to share.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eleven: The Body.

His heart does not beat any faster. His breath does not hitch; his voice does not waver.

His fingers taste ice.

‘I wouldn’t normally ask, especially on such short notice. But Doctor Bloom is out of town—I believe you met her at the hospital?’ He doesn’t give her time to murmur what he knows will be confirmation. ‘I am deeply concerned about this patient.’

Will watches him traverse the length of the room, trailed by Zoe and Buster. His breakfast is growing cold on the table.

‘I mean, look, sure.’ Beverly Katz’s voice is pressed tinny and flat by the struggling connection. ‘But I’m no nurse and you’re just springing this on me—does he need, I don’t know, medication? Help in the bathroom? Is he going to be okay with me doing that, you know?’

‘Please don’t worry. All you’d have to do is keep him company, make sure he eats, make sure he doesn’t overexert himself—but don’t let him sleep too long. You might need to prepare a meal—the kitchen is fully stocked—or help him remember—Will is perfectly capable of indicating when he needs help and what he needs help with.’

Will’s eyebrow lifts at the lie.

‘I—alright, okay. Work’s a bit—just give me an hour, alright? I can be there in an hour. Maybe an hour and a half.’

It is not ideal. Hannibal needs to go *now* and he wishes he could shout it at her.

‘Thank you,’ he says instead. ‘Don’t hesitate to call me if there are any issues.’

The line disconnects with a click. Hannibal looks at Will.

‘Do you remember Beverly, Will? She came to visit you at the hospital. She brought a stuffed dog.’

Will stares down at his plate. He gives a jerky nod.

‘Beverly worked with you at the FBI. Do you remember that, Will?’

A one-shouldered shrug. Will isn’t engaging with the conversation, but Hannibal doesn’t have the time to stay and wait on him to process.

‘Will you make her coffee? Maybe you could take her to walk the dogs?’

‘Fine.’

‘You can call me anytime if—’

‘I said *fine.* Just go already, you’re wasting time.’

Hannibal doesn’t want to go. He wants to stay until Beverly arrives, uneasy at the thought of Will sitting in an empty house, left to fend off the cold alone.

‘Will you be alright on your own for an hour?’

Will’s eyes sweep over the array of food on the table. His hands follow, indicating the whole of the presentation. ‘No,’ he bites out. ‘I think I’ll starve.’

‘Will,’ Hannibal scolds, voice sharper than he would have liked.

‘I’m alone any time you go get groceries, Hannibal,’ Will sighs. ‘Or walk the dogs. Jesus.’

He is that, but after the hour or two that he has to himself, Hannibal returns to make up for lost time. Today, he is leaving for an ill-defined stretch, abandoning Will into the hands of an acquaintance with little understanding of the care he requires—and it is all because the gall of Hannibal’s correspondent knows no bounds.

The fury in him calls for a rush down the frozen roads, but the sheen of snow renders brakes near useless and Hannibal is forced to drive carefully, wasting precious time. He’s had Donald’s home address on file for months now as a precaution—as a plan? The obstreperous intruder is correct in this at least: disposing of Donald would have been the judicious course of action, and Hannibal remembers faintly arriving at this conclusion himself, back when he still had time for such things.

The thrill of having that time again, torn off and stolen, slides down Hannibal’s neck, warming every bit of skin it touches.

He hasn’t come to save Donald’s life, so he isn’t disappointed when it becomes clear he is too late. The suburban house, a dull façade that poorly shields life’s deficiencies, swallows the song of the doorbell until it dries up. Faint tire tracks mark the snow in front of the garage.

The location on Hannibal's phone is disabled, always, so he enters the address manually. A bit of scrolling around and he finds the stretch of forest a few miles off the main road. It might be a bit of a trek, but he has picked up the scent now. In his stomach there is a warmth, and he knows he will succeed.

He spends the better part of an hour driving around roads webbed into the woods like fingers twined into hair. When he finds what he is looking for, he is appalled at how easy it was: the car stands abandoned so close to the road that it is visible through the naked trees, and the bushes on each side are broken off and obvious. The road is poorly maintained, empty and out of the way, but it is only a matter of time before someone else will be driving past.

The moment he steps out of his car, he can smell the blood.

He pulls on his gloves as he treads carefully on the wet earth, snow creaking under the soles of his shoes. Both on the driver's and the passenger's side, the front doors in Donald's car hang open, but the snow around the front of the hood is undisturbed, all signs of struggle and any footsteps already covered by the flakes twirling continually through the dry air.

But the blood shows through.

It is everywhere: in the white of the snow, on the barks of the nearby trees; on the silver car varnish, rubbing off at the carriage; on Donald's clothes and on Donald's face, or what little is left of it.

Hannibal is not FBI profiler Will Graham—even Will isn't FBI profiler Will Graham anymore. But the story of what happened here hangs in the chill of the air like the puffs of warm breath that come out of Hannibal's mouth, parted halfway in silent wonder. The killer must have been strong, or cunning, or he must have been someone Donald knew well enough to allow into his car. Once there, either the killer had driven or he had threatened Donald into compliance, and he had taken him to this corner of the woods. Did Donald try to run, or did the killer leap out of the car and drag him into fresh snow, spraying water and dirt?

It's likely the killer had a weapon of some kind: a gun, maybe, though Hannibal prefers to imagine a hunting knife, or at least a rifle. Whatever he had, he never used. Donald's throat has been torn open, the wound a ragged thing over which the flood of hot blood has now cooled and frozen over. His face is a canvas and the bruises lain one over the other are strokes of rabid fury—not the fury that Hannibal feels, cold and distant, but immediate and burning, drawing blood into cheeks and dripping sweat down the neck.

The sleeves of Donald's shirt lie in shreds. The claw marks have singed into blue skin. Three of his fingers rest at an odd angle, and crack when Hannibal pushes at the hand with the tip of his shoe—did he break them as he struggled to wrench the beast off, or did the beast take them between his teeth and drink in the sickening crunch? The scream of pain?

Donald wasn't killed. He was *mauled*. Not only is Hannibal's intruder rash and bold and rude, he is out of control—it takes a thing unhinged to take a man like this, to rip him to shreds, to bite through his throat and then to leave him behind like a discarded toy.

A memory surfaces, smelling of dust: the face of a hunter hidden under Will's dreamed features, the desperate fury of the boy Hannibal once was, the sounds the man under him made when Hannibal bit into his throat. That night in the woods after Hannibal killed Norkus. The night he was found and made warm by a man who thought he knew him. The second life Hannibal took. Did the body look like this after, how Donald looks now? Hannibal despised his own foolishness then and he despises that he is reminded of it now.

He is sure that once the FBI have descended onto the scene, they will be able to tell exactly when Donald breathed his last breath. They will be able to trace the trajectory of the victim and the perpetrator, they will canvass the woods and find the tire marks of the getaway car, perhaps parked nearby in anticipation of the murder—but would this rabid animal have had such foresight? Or would he have stalked back through the woods, feet bare on frozen ground?

They will sweep under Donald's fingernails and they will find peels of skin. They will find every hair pulled out of the intruder's scalp during the struggle. They don't need criminal profiler Will Graham to find such a messy amateur.

They will—if Hannibal lets them.

But the intruder's connection to Hannibal is an enigma, his motives are uncertain, his very existence is a question of faith—and even if Hannibal were sure that the benefits of revealing him to the world outweighed the risks, he is not sure he is ready to do so.

So, he gets to work.

A grey mist falls over the day like a blanket. Hannibal's eyes tire from peering through the dim and his hands ache from the cold. Piece by piece, every last trace of the bloodshed is wiped away—the blood washes off, the limbs and bones are taken deeper into the forest and concealed underground, the heart and kidneys are packaged into foil. The cold has kept the organs in good shape and if Hannibal had easy access to his basement, he would have taken more. The keys have been left in the ignition, so he abandons the car two miles west, then trudges back through the knee-deep snow.

He would have missed his spot entirely if not for the Bentley standing watch. The dredges he dug, the caving that held the body, the lingering specks of blood, they have all been effaced by snow. The blank is perfect and virginal—as though Hannibal's intruder had never been here at all.

The thought tugs at Hannibal's stomach.

Quite the drive it was, he types up.

He presses *send*.

His breath colours the air a fast-fading white. Every exhale echoes dully in his head. One, two, three. One, two—

I enjoyed myself, the intruder says. It hangs, precarious: the lack of punctuation makes it appear unfinished, a mere tease at more to come. More does not come, of course—Hannibal will need to ask for it.

That much is clear. Though next time you should consider cleaning up after yourself.

Did you clean?

Yes.

There you are then

Hannibal anticipates another rise of icy offense at such boorishness, but it's impossible to produce such a thing. Not when all he can see as he reads the words is Will: Will's mouth, Will's brow, Will's impertinence.

This time, I did. But I hope you will not make this a habit.

Don't want me getting used to it for when you're not around anymore, do we

Hannibal types faster than he thinks, but his thumb hovers over the send button.

He feels precipitous.

It's too heady a feeling not to indulge.

Is that a threat, Will?

He hits send.

Then there is silence, stretching and swelling, and on that lack, on the words hanging in the radio silence, on them feeds the hot ache of shame, the pierce of realization—what extraordinary self-deception this is after all. Hannibal wants Will to be on the other end of this line so that he may tug on it until he is pulled closer and closer, until he is again within arm's reach. But wanting it to be so does not *make* it so. Hannibal's fantasy is undeniably his, it lives in him and it tells his hands what to do and his lungs when to breathe, but it does not exist anywhere else. It is not *in* the world.

Hannibal wishes he could take the message back. He knows he cannot delete it, but he tries anyway, nearly convincing himself for a moment that there is a way, that if he were more tech-savvy he would find it. But ultimately, the embarrassment does not matter, because the intruder does not matter. If the intruder thinks Hannibal suspects him to be Will, if he supposes him deranged or mistaken or stupid, then that will only serve in Hannibal's favour. Eventually, he must tug on that line and he must capture himself the beast, and it will be made all the easier if the beast thinks it has the upper hand.

He puts the phone away and he gets in the car. He hopes Beverly thought to make Will dinner, because surely Hannibal has missed it by now. It feels as though there is a bird in his stomach, flapping its wings and thrashing about, and the anxiety it bleeds into Hannibal's flesh is lessened only by remembering the meat, held securely in the icebox on the backseat.

He sees the lights of the house first, a warm yellow that colours the still-falling snow. Looking through its glow is like looking through a piece of amber picked up from the beach—Hannibal and Mischa used to stroll down the long edges of sand every summer, cold water prickling at their ankles, and pick up all the amber they could find. You had to go early in the morning, before the beaches had been swept clean by the promenade merchants, who snapped up the best pieces and transformed them into strings of beads, drooping earrings and lucky trees. Hannibal and Mischa took it into their heads to open such a business one summer and made an attempt at crafting their sea-gold into a lucky tree. The excess glue solidified around the bark and stuck Mischa's fingers together.

The dogs do not run out to meet Hannibal but linger around Beverly in the doorway. The uneasiness of their stirring is mirrored on her face.

'Miss Katz,' Hannibal says first, quickly, and then, 'how is Will?'

'He's—okay, look.' A hand runs through her hair. She is trying very hard to keep up the casual façade, but she is also refusing to meet his eye. 'He's alright, but it's been a long day, you know what I'm saying? A few roadblocks along the way and a bit of—creative swerving involved.'

Hannibal slips past her into the house, not trusting himself to answer just yet.

He finds Will in bed, pressed into a compact shape. Winston's snout peaks out from the crook of his elbow, and that alone is enough for the coil in Hannibal's chest to twist into shape: Will is happy to curl up with them on the floor, but he *never* allows the dogs on the bed.

'Hello, Will.'

Will doesn't answer.

Hannibal feels at his forehead. It's warm, but not overly so.

He rounds on Beverly. From the widening of her eyes, he can tell the laces on his mask have come loose.

'Jack called me,' she explains quickly. 'He asked me where I was and I told him—I didn't expect him to actually drive over, alright? But you know how Jack is. Apparently, Will's been ignoring his calls.'

Hannibal suddenly quite wants to get Alana on the phone so she can *hear this.*

'And why,' he asks innocently, 'did Jack feel the need to pay a house visit?'

'He wanted to ask Will when he's thinking of coming back from sick leave.'

'Coming back from sick leave,' Hannibal repeats. 'To work cases for Jack.'

Beverly groans. 'Look, I *know,* okay? I get it. In his defence, he dialled down on his usual coercion tactics. Apparently all you have to do to get Jack to ease off is spend a month in intensive care. Wish I'd known that one years ago.'

‘I’m afraid I don’t see as much humour in this situation as you do.’

‘Jack brought a file. There’s this case—’

Unbelievable, Hannibal thinks, wishing he could say it. If only he had Alana here—

‘Do you remember those Washington murders, with the—’ She glances at Will, then points at her stomach and makes a gesture indicating a falling out of guts. ‘They found another body a few weeks ago, same injuries. And the new victim, John Kelney, he knew Edward Tussey, the kid from the last one, so obvious link there. Only the organs were missing. Which, that’s very, Ripper-y, I guess. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the profile, but the Ripper tends to kill in these bursts, so this isn’t *exactly* like him—too long a break. But if there’s even a chance that he did this one and the one before, then he could have some connection to Tussey and Kelney.’

Hannibal wraps up the flare of quiet satisfaction and sets it to the back of his mind.

‘Jack showed him the crime scene photos. Will—he didn’t take that well.’

Of course he didn’t. That old grief, the one he’d thought he’d laid to rest alongside John Kelney’s body, rises back to the surface. Will did see his tribute in the end, but he could not hope to understand it. The picture Hannibal painted will fuel his nightmares and set his bones with tremors, but it will not translate the feelings he has put into it, unless only into an overwhelming confusion of impressions that Will is in no state to sort through.

‘Thank you for coming on such short notice,’ he says hollowly. ‘It won’t happen again.’

‘Oh, come on, what was I supposed to do? Not let him through the door? Barricade us in? Actually—I’m going, alright, but can I talk to you outside for a moment?’

Hannibal steps out onto the porch. The air’s sting is sharp on his heated cheeks. Through the door ajar, he hears Beverly murmuring her goodbyes into Will’s deaf ears.

‘We don’t know each other very well,’ she says once she has joined him, the wooden railing creaking under the combined weight of their arms. ‘But I’m going to speak plainly now.’

‘Of course.’

‘I don’t know what the hell you think you’re doing with him,’ she says, ‘but it needs to stop.’

For a moment, Hannibal sees white.

‘What *am* I doing?’ he grinds out. ‘I am curious to hear your opinion.’

‘You’re keeping him locked up in here,’ Beverly’s voice rises. ‘You’re with him twenty-four seven. You talk about him like he’s completely incapable of making his own decisions. The way you spoke about it on the phone, that’s definitely what I was expecting. But it’s bullshit.’

‘I never claimed that Will is incapable—’

‘But he’s going to break into pieces if you allow him to talk to his boss? About his actual job?’

‘Will is in no state to return to his *actual job,’* Hannibal says sharply. ‘And I don’t imagine he ever will be. I hope you can forgive his delay in making this clear to the FBI.’

‘Says who? Who says he won’t ever be? You say?’

Hannibal smiles grimly. ‘I say,’ he affirms.

‘Did you take his phone?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Is that why he’s not been picking up? I’ve tried calling him, too.’

‘Will has full possession of his phone. That he chooses not to answer calls is, I believe, entirely within his right to *decide for himself*.’

She is silent for a moment. Her voice has never broken past the line into yelling, but her chest is heaving regardless.

‘Look,’ she says finally. ‘I know this isn’t nice to hear. I’m not trying to make you into something you’re not. But you’ve got to know what this looks like. First, he’s taking you on cute little trips around Washington. Meanwhile you’re still his therapist. Okay, that’s fine. You know, we’re all adults. Things happen—but see, I don’t think anything did happen at that point. Cute little trips around Washington is the sum of it, yeah? And then, Will gets sick. He can’t even take a piss on his own for a while. Suddenly you’re living with him full-time. No nurses, no assistants, no one around at all—’

Hannibal has to clutch at the porch rail and grip as hard as his knuckles will go. ‘You are accusing me of taking advantage,’ he summarizes drily.

‘Yeah. And no. I did ask him about it today and I think he told me the truth.’

Hannibal hears static.

‘You asked him—’

‘Goddamn it, you’re doing it again! He’s not a child, is he? I asked him if you were sleeping together and he said no. He was *fine*.’

Hannibal did not for a moment think that Will might be anything less than *fine* merely hearing the question. But Hannibal isn’t fine knowing it has been asked: there are some things that belong to the quiet, that are not meant to be voiced so crudely.

‘We had a fun time, besides the whole Jack catastrophe.’ Her voice reaches him as if through water. ‘I’d like to see him again. I get it if you don’t want me playing sitter anymore, but I will be coming round for coffee at some point. And you’re going to have to be okay with that. And then hopefully we don’t need to have this conversation again, alright?’

Hannibal nods once, though his dignity does not allow for more than the barest tilt of the head.

He waits on the porch until the lights of her car disappear, and until he can no longer hear or smell the engine.

Then, he goes back inside. He strips in the bathroom, changes into pyjamas, pulls on his thickest sweater and drops saline into his reddened eyes. There are leftovers of a pasta Beverly must have cooked on the kitchen top, but Hannibal feels sick at the very idea, so he makes himself a quick egg scramble instead. He puts Donald's meat into the freezer, for when he has the energy to give it the treatment it deserves.

He'll prepare it medium-rare, he thinks: to honour its savage provenance.

There is ample space for him to sit on the left side of Will's bed. From this vantage point, he administers the injections, which are met with little resistance. Then, he relaxes against the pillow and starts talking, like he used to do at the hospital: long evenings filled with his voice and with Will's silence, the orange light diluted through the night, the feeling of Hannibal's throat drying up and his tongue stumbling over consonants as it tires.

Only now that the contrast is so stark does he realise how much Will has improved since then.

He tells him about the amber he collected with Misha and the way they played with it after, pretending the gems were lumps of gold they'd dug out from ripe New Zealand grounds. He tells him about a famous thief who steals brains out of human skulls, and how his greed makes him seek out ever lovelier and pinker pieces. He tells him about the hunter with eyes like black wells and a mouth like the slash of a knife, who tires of the thief's arrogance and chases him through the woods, until the thief's knees buckle and he succumbs to his death.

He tells him then about a time in his youth when he still trusted that the world might be his and that he might belong in the world; about a time when fantasy and reality no longer ran intertwined, but when he hoped still they would meet one another again. He speaks of the rich, luscious rooms that housed his lovers in Florence, though he does not tell him the name of the city or the names of the lovers, or even admit in so many words that it happened to *him*. It was a boy, that is what he says; and he tells him of this boy's nights, and how the boy yanked his guts right out of his own stomach to make room for sleep, as he lay awake at his lover's side.

Story by story, he tames the images of Will's day, and he tames the images of his own, until the question of which one's which becomes moot and they click together into one whole.

Story by story, Will unfolds from within himself, and he blinks with eyes that see clearer, and mutters words that make more and more sense.

'How was your day, Will?' he asks once he has hope enough he will get an answer.

'Fine, but—' A shiver wrecks through Will, sudden and electric. 'I was cold, I was cold—it's so cold and I don't know where my sweater is. The red, the red sweater.'

‘The red sweater. It might be in the laundry basket. Why didn’t you wear another sweater?’

‘I—I don’t know where they are, I don’t—’

‘The wardrobe. Just there, do you see?’

‘I don’t want another sweater. I wanted *that one*.’

‘I can bring it down from the bathroom for you. Would you like that?’

Will shakes his head wildly, like he cannot think of a thing that might be worse. ‘I don’t want it now, I wanted it before!’

‘I know.’

He’s silent for a single wheezing breath, and then he whimpers, from the back of his throat, from the deep in his trembling frame, ‘I lost a dog. I can’t find him, I don’t know where—but there’s one missing.’

The dread is a slap across Hannibal’s face, but then his brain catches up: he is certain he has counted all seven when he arrived. ‘I don’t think there’s anyone missing, Will. Which one are you thinking of?’

‘I don’t know! I don’t know, but—I’m worried—I didn’t tell her, because she doesn’t know them—she wouldn’t even know which one—’

‘Let’s count them. We’ll count together. Do you remember how many we need?’

‘I, uh—seven.’

‘Seven.’

It’s a good thing Will’s bed has clear view of the lounge and the dog beds, so they can count without moving: once and then again, and once more just to make sure. Hannibal wonders whether Will’s sense of lack might have come from seeing Hannibal’s own mattress sitting empty among the dog beds.

‘Beverly told me Jack came to visit.’

Will nods. He’s still shivering under the hand that Hannibal has rested on his shoulder. The shivers do not dislodge the hand, merely translate onto it, and travel like pain from a hurt elbow, up Hannibal’s arm and neck and all the way to his jaw.

Before Hannibal can form another question, Will whispers into the tight space between their bodies,

‘Don’t leave me.’

He is crying. The shivers dispel to make room for sobs, wrecking through Hannibal’s chest when he pulls him close, and Will’s mouth is wet with the saliva that he doesn’t swallow

because it still takes conscious effort when he's tired—

'I have to pay bills. Are you paying bills? But Jack—he said—I don't remember how to pay bills. Do I do that online? Do I—there are letters? I don't remember. I have to learn for when—and I'm on sick leave, but what happens after? I can't go back to work, I don't know how—I don't know how—I don't know where you go, I don't know where it is, and if I don't want to go back, then what do I—I have to tell someone? Right? Jack, or—no, someone else, I don't know—'

'I will find out who to tell. And I will show you how to pay bills if you like.'

His fingers tighten like claws on Hannibal's shoulder.

'You can't leave me,' Will says.

'No,' Hannibal agrees softly. 'I can't.'

He presses his face into the pillow Will's head rests on, pushing closer until, through the scents of shampoo and tiredness, he is breathing in Will's natural smell, concealed in the pocket of warmth at the tip of his scalp.

His hands are warm and painful around Hannibal's arm. The spread of his back seeps hot and wet through the flimsy fabric of the T-shirt. A knee pushes into Hannibal's thigh. A foot quivers periodically at Hannibal's ankle. An elbow rests in the crook of Hannibal's elbow, like his is the lock and Will's is the key.

They lie side-by-side for the better part of an hour. Will's sobs quieten and die. His breaths lengthen, his body slackens in Hannibal's arms. The racing pulse that bulges the column of his throat slows and his eyes drift shut, the final tears like drops of nectar on dark lashes. He cycles through emotion like it is a race, and once he is done with his last, he rests with his forehead pressed against Hannibal's shoulder—an hour, and Hannibal still cannot quite make himself believe he is holding him.

But after the day he's had, Will's exhaustion is mirrored in Hannibal, and soon he has to disentangle himself from Will's loosened grip, pull the duvet tightly around him, let the dogs out and brush his teeth and wash up after dinner—and then he collapses onto his mattress, onto the floor, caring not a whit.

The mattress is a single, but wide enough for Hannibal to stretch pleasantly.

He cannot.

He is wrung-out, yet he cannot sleep. A space awes empty at his side, left ready for Will's ghost to curl into, and the ghost is breathing into Hannibal's skin: into the palm of his hand where he has stroked down Will's back, into the patches on his arm where Will's skin has brushed, the circle on his thigh that Will's knee has drawn.

The dogs sleep. The house sleeps. The night flows around him like a stream around stone.

'You awake?'

Hannibal props himself up on his elbows. He gazes through the dark at Will's form, sitting up in bed.

'Do you need anything, Will?'

Will shuffles to the floor. He brings his duvet with him: it is held secure around his shoulders like a cape and sweeps the floor behind him as he glides through the house on bare feet, stepping around the dogs slumbering in his way. Moonlight reflects off snow and falls through the windows onto his face, painting it a white glimmer.

When he reaches the place where Hannibal lies, he stops.

And then all at once he is over him: a leg hoisted over Hannibal's thigh, his weight shifting in Hannibal's lap as he rises a few inches, and settles, and wraps them in a cocoon of duvet and white sheet, and kisses hard enough to bruise.

Hannibal's lips—his neck, his shoulders—his hair where he clutches him—

But his hands grip at Will's thighs without Hannibal needing to think, and when he feels them tremble with the effort of keeping upright, a flash of intention cuts through the haze of drowning. He sucks in air through his nose and flexes the overexerted muscle in his arms, flipping them over so Will lands softly on the pillow, thighs cradled in Hannibal's hands.

There are still places sketched onto Hannibal left without filling, and he needs all of Will *closer*. He snakes his arms under his back to settle like a vice on the nape of his neck. Will breathes out shakily, wiggling in Hannibal's hold like an animal caught in a trap.

Hannibal tightens the clasps until it hurts. Will whimpers, pulling on his hair in retribution, then scratches at his back, all claws and heat and smearing spit. Hannibal shoves him down the mattress so Will's ass sits flush against his hips and his hair spreads behind him, a black halo on the white pillow. His feet ram into the back of Hannibal's thighs, one heel knocking painfully into his tailbone. They press, push, crowd him again into Will, more, closer—and there is less space between them than before, though a moment ago it seemed impossible.

When the hands clasped around his neck loosen their hold, Hannibal releases Will's lip from between his teeth and eases up to make room for breath. Will's mouth is a violent red, scratched and sucked raw. Hannibal's own aches with the memory of it.

'We haven't done this before,' he says, in case Will was unclear on this point.

'We haven't?'

Hannibal's lips tug up so fast and tight that it sends a jolt of pain through his face. Will's eyes appear dark in the night, but Hannibal cannot fathom thinking of other Wills right now, of intruders or hunters or anyone—why would he ever want to?

'We haven't.'

'Hm,' Will hums with mock wonder. He smiles and shakes his head as much as Hannibal's hold will allow. 'Weird. Now shush. It's the middle of the night, I'm trying to sleep.'

And he kisses Hannibal again.

Chapter End Notes

A looong chapter coming up next that was so much fun to write. We'll also be ticking an important box on the *Things That Must Happen in Any S1 AU* list.

The Secret

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will settle into spring in Wolf Trap.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twelve: The Secret.

Will stays with him all night.

Hannibal wakes every hour, and every hour he is surprised to see him. The colour of his mouth fades as dawn grows closer, and he shifts restlessly around five before Hannibal manages to shush him back to sleep, but he is otherwise unchanged when morning comes.

Hannibal doesn't suppose he'll be allowed to kiss him in the light of day, so when Will's eyes slip open and settle on him, he doesn't even try. It would be excessive.

'Ugh,' is the first thing Will says. 'Dogs?'

'I'll let them out.'

'Breakfast?'

'In a moment, Will.'

Will's eyes close and his mouth stretches into a grin. Hannibal wouldn't change a single thing about last night, but if he regrets anything, it is the teeth that never closed around his skin, not once, not anywhere.

'Hannibal.'

'Yes?'

'Dogs.'

'Of course.'

That is their morning.

And it is their morning the day after, and the day after that.

February brings with it false promises of spring. They take the dogs on long strolls in the woods, where icicles drip down thready black branches and birds chirp confusedly at the closed buds. The dogs nip and sniff at various treasures emerging from the thinning snow and must be distracted with games of fetch. The sun is strong on those days, burning through the frost in the air.

Will walks steadier and longer every time. With a stick loosely gripped at his side and a confident step, he looks like a knight from Hannibal and Mischa's games. They used to walk like this too, kicking up the dirt on the path, calling after the dogs, holding a weapon in one hand and a mittened palm in the other. They were well-fed and well-maintained children, and the cold never bothered them even in the deepest of winters—and Will too, though Hannibal dresses him up in several layers and runs him baths after, one day pulls off his cap and wrenches his scarf loose. Hannibal cautions him against it, of course, because he *is* still on steroids and a simple cold can very well lead to pneumonia—yes, it *can,* Will, do you remember I have a medical degree?—but in the end all he gets for his trouble is snow rubbed into the back of his neck.

Will comes off the steroids a week after that. In the long term, this hopefully means increased energy levels and an end to the thinning hair, the fluctuations in appetite, and the bruising on Will's thighs that blooms every time he knocks into the leg of a table. In the short term, it means an end to daily injections. Hannibal buys a bouquet of delphiniums and snap dragons, and he makes macarons to celebrate. They take them out to eat on the porch alongside the coffee that's now Will's signature dish. Will likes the macarons. He is smiling like the sun itself. Hannibal gently daydreams about licking the sugar off his fingers.

Their mornings are slow not out of inclination but necessity—Will grouses through morning routines like they are a most sadistic type of torture, and he renders it entirely impossible for Hannibal to finish the usual chores in a respectable amount of time. He must be dredged out of bed, reminded to brush his teeth a minimum of five times, spends an hour looking grim over his breakfast, and refuses to get dressed until Hannibal pulls off his T-shirt and threatens to open the window.

Later they walk, or they sit on the porch, close their eyes against the sun and throw the dogs their toys without looking. Hannibal tries to fit in some work. On some days, he drives to his Baltimore office. On others, he does online sessions or he works on his notes until he is inevitably distracted by Will looking for something he has misplaced, Will determining the study the ideal place for a bit of roughhousing with the dogs, Will announcing he is hungry—Will. Leaning over his shoulder to try and decipher his curlicued handwriting. 'Can you write normal, please?' he will sigh. 'I can barely read print.'

'Go read print then. Do you need help finding a book?'

Will's voice dips lower and shifts into a tone that is meant to mirror Hannibal's, but does a rather poor job at it. 'Do you remember where the books are, Will?' he mocks. His mouth is right at Hannibal's ear, every exhale creasing his forehead as he tries not to squirm. 'They're on a shelf. Do you remember what a shelf is, Will?'

'Yes, Hannibal,' Hannibal says in his own voice, knowing any attempt at parroting Will's would inevitably hurt his own ears. 'I know exactly where to find a book, but I would first

like to be a brat about it.'

Will's chuckle is a step over the line. Hannibal's entire body contracts and releases. His fingers instinctively tighten on his pencil, and it snaps in half.

'Jesus,' Will says as he straightens, his absence a cold pocket of air at Hannibal's side. 'Want some of my—ugh, my what?'

'Xanax,' Hannibal guesses. 'No, thank you.'

Will gives him a pat on the head before he leaves. And Hannibal's focus is gone for the day.

The hours after lunch are inevitably an exercise in patience. Shopping trips, laundry and patient check-ups are all fine distractions, but also things Hannibal must do alone, and Will's absence confuses and disquiets him. Worst of all is when Will naps: this can stretch to long hours of complete solitude, and though Hannibal bakes him tartes, signs up to a local swimming pool and buys himself a new set of pencils, he cannot rid himself of the endless fidgeting that plagues him every time he misses the burn of Will's eyes on the back of his neck.

Dinner always comes too late. Will's swallowing has improved and he is growing accustomed to more varied fare, so Hannibal takes them on culinary journeys around the globe: they eat fish grilled and drizzled with lemon and Greek oil, they eat osso buco and marinated chestnuts and Korean pork belly wrapped in escarole lettuce. Will likes it all. Of course, Will also likes store-bought raspberry jello and frozen pizza, but Hannibal does his best not to think about that.

Will's long afternoon naps stuff him full of energy that hums and bristles through the golden evenings—the orange lights of the house chased out of every nook and crevice by the descending night—though it rarely extends to an interest in helping with the dishes. He chases Chip and Casper around the yard until the poor beasts are harking and sputtering; he reads out loud passages from crime novels and thrillers, stammering and frustrated, until he decides he knows already how the story will end or else doesn't care; he goes through Hannibal's sketchbooks, orders books and music, and burns through the battery on Hannibal's tablet watching videos on anything from the diagnosis of lupus to nineteenth century fashion.

Hannibal has his suspicions on the drive behind these random and easily discarded investigations, but only confirms it for himself when one night he exits the kitchen, dishes drying on the rack and leftovers secured in the fridge, to find Will bent over the worktable, his fingers pinched precariously around a fishing hook, magnified in the orb of the glass.

He watches in silence as Will drops the hook, picks it up—fumbles with the line—drops first the tweezers, then the filigree feather in deep green. Even as Will shoves at the table, overturning the box of supplies and triggering a supplicatory whine from Casper, Hannibal hangs back. Only once the tears have started does he approach and rest a hand on the back of his neck where he's warmest, which is more than he would allow himself in the morning, and less than he hopes he'll be allowed at night.

‘Just because Will Graham enjoyed crafting his own lures,’ he says after a beat of silence, broken only by the wheeze of Will’s hitched breath, ‘doesn’t mean that you must as well, Will.’

‘Yeah,’ Will rasps, ‘just because Will Graham had hand-eye coordination doesn’t mean I get to put food into my own mouth.’

Hannibal clicks his tongue in admonishment. ‘You are improving every day, Will.’

‘And every day might be the day I stop.’

‘The brain is plastic.’ Hannibal tightens his hold. ‘But yes. And what happens then?’

Will shrugs.

‘Then you can’t be Will Graham again.’

‘Don’t know the guy,’ Will snaps. ‘I know I can’t be Will Graham again.’

But the yearning in his voice is unmistakeable; Hannibal admires how much better he has got at lying lately.

‘Why try then? You’ll tie his fishing lures, you’ll read his papers, you’ll get to know his friends. Will you ask Jack to put you on his team again? Will you chase down killers and imagine yourself among them?’

‘I can’t do that,’ Will whispers. ‘You know I can’t.’

‘Our wills and wants change every time the sun comes up. Every morning, we wake up anew. You have woken up from a debilitating illness—I would say that deserves a reinvention.’

‘Right.’

‘What you are today is far more important than what you were yesterday, Will.’

Will straightens, dislodging Hannibal’s hand. Anger is curling his fingers into fists. ‘What I am today,’ he pushes through clasped jaws, ‘is a *shell*. Half a man. An egg broken open.’

Hannibal’s fingers find their way back around Will’s neck. He digs his thumb into where skin disappears under hanks of hair, and Will’s body sags loose like fabric. ‘Shall we try to fill you?’ Hannibal asks softly, disappointed when the innuendo doesn’t so much as crease Will’s eyes.

He takes him to sit by the piano. The keys are worn away with use and several sound distinctly off-key, but he can just imagine the sort of conversation that would result if he dared suggest bringing a stranger into the house to tune it. The sheet music Will owns is a collection of miscellanea, from simple melodies for one hand adorned in a child’s drawings, through country songs poorly translated from the guitar, to elaborate Chopin. Hannibal theorizes the piano and the music both came with the house, but whether Will ever made use

of them remains a mystery. He had certainly never mentioned it; any interest would have been passing or deeply personal, and for Hannibal's purposes now either will do.

He teaches Will to play the right hand to *Silent Night,* from a copy blackened like it had been printed through too many times, riddled with beautifully unsuccessful attempts at drawing a falling star. Will's hand is too tense, his fingers are claws and his wrist is angled down sharply. It sounds like he's hammering in nails. Hannibal cups his hand and reminds him to relax, only to be told off for distracting him. He resigns himself to a migraine later and focuses on his own hand.

'This is exhausting,' Will complains, though his voice is considerably brighter than before. 'Play this one.'

'I thought you were supposed to be learning.'

'I'll watch and learn.'

He does watch, though Hannibal cannot tell whether he learns. His eyes follow the glide of Hannibal's fingers over the keys, mouth quirking up whenever he stumbles or hangs on a note to decipher the fading stave. His right foot taps out the rhythms of the melodies he plucks from the stack, one after another after another, and their shoulders brush together whenever Hannibal reaches toward the high octaves. The moment is a picture, Hannibal knows, that in his mind will run looped inside the kaiserpanorama of his life in Wolf Trap. He feels as though he is already reliving it through the lens of memory; but equally he wants it done with, because it will be time for bed then.

'It was hard for him, too,' Will says suddenly.

Hannibal stops playing.

'Working with Jack,' elaborates Will, eyes unseeing on the black keys. 'I think it would probably be impossible for me. But brain's plastic. Someday, it might just be hard. But for him, for Will Graham, it was hard. Maybe impossible.'

Fear runs cold in Hannibal's veins. 'You remember working for Jack?' he asks evenly.

'I don't remember the cases,' Will admits, 'or where I was, or when, or—who. I don't know what I remember. Just the overall—some nightmares, I think. I remember dreaming about a man with antlers on his head. A clawed animal eating my face out. Slicing a girl's throat open. At least,' he grins like he's about to throw up dinner, 'I hope they were dreams.'

'They sound like dreams,' Hannibal says gently. 'I am quite confident none of these things have happened to you, or else you'd likely have mentioned them.'

'He did it anyway. Even though it was—it was—not—*impossible*. Even though it was impossible.'

Hannibal feels a swell of longing, but it does not overcome him like it used to: it feels cleaner now, healed and scabbed over.

‘Will Graham was a selfless man,’ he says fondly.

‘Maybe,’ Will allows. ‘I don’t know. Maybe he was selfless. All I know is that I need to find something else to do for when—*if*—I can ever do anything—because I’m *selfish.*’

‘Self-preservation isn’t selfish, Will.’

Will drags his eyes away from the piano and rests them on Hannibal. They’re blue and large and threaded through with a sadness that Hannibal fears he can never grasp. ‘Isn’t it?’ He asks it like he’s asking Hannibal, before answering for him, ‘I think sometimes it is.’

When he sighs, the ghost of Will Graham sleeps in that sigh. For a moment, Hannibal can smell him again: the sweet feverishness of him, the horrible cologne, the bitterness of gas station coffee and disinfectant and blood.

His Will doesn’t run fevers these days, and if he did, Hannibal would break them. His Will would never be allowed cheap, questionably sourced and fume-infused coffee. The blood from prickles and papercuts is wiped off and contained under band-aids, and Hannibal threw out the last of the cologne stash weeks ago.

The kaiserpanorama of FBI Profiler Will Graham revolves in Hannibal’s head and glitters its images, inviting him on a journey into a story now complete—but the journey is best had lying in bed alone in a night’s quietest moments. And these days, Hannibal is rarely in bed alone.

Will likes to make him wait. Sometimes, Hannibal lies still for mere minutes before he hears the tell-tale slip of sheets and shuffle of feet. Other times, he stews in his anticipation for hours, until Will is woken by a dream or a full bladder or whatever the need is that strikes him in the small hours of night. Then, Will’s body is shifting into Hannibal’s; his cotton fabrics slide over heating skin, his tongue plunges into Hannibal’s mouth so deep and insistent that he occasionally worries he will gag from it. No clothes are ever removed, and they escalate only until they are both breathless, but Hannibal gets close just from the way the jut of Will’s hipbone digs into the flesh of his stomach.

The night when his fishing lures disappoint him, Will scrambles into Hannibal’s bed first thing, but pushes him off with a discontented whine when he makes to find his lips. Instead, he yanks Hannibal’s arm into a tight hold around his back and curls himself into his chest.

When he moves, he leads with his mouth. He trails wet kisses down Hannibal’s chin, traces the line of his throat, maps out the divots and edges at the base of his neck. He snakes a hand between the tight press of their bodies to tug Hannibal’s shirt out of the way, and presses sucking kisses into his collarbones.

It goes on for the better part of an hour. At times, it seems as though Will might be done, his body unfurling and his breaths dipping into snored purrs, but the minutest shift from Hannibal and he rouses, blinks blearily, wrinkles his nose in some emotion too short-lived to catch, and resumes. Hannibal dares slip his hand under the hem of Will’s T-shirt and press it into the warmth of his back, but that is the closest to reciprocation he is allowed.

He lies with his eyes open, fixed on the dark well that holds the ceiling, and feels like a bird trapped in a cage of bone.

On this night, on each of their nights, there is an instinct in him, a terrible wanting, to give Will more: to tell him stories he has never told before, to paint him pictures only ever viewed in the attics of his mind—to make sounds that soar louder, to direct him to where it feels best to be touched. But it is a destructive instinct, a beguiling hoax. He cannot have what he holds and release his secrets at the same time: they make up the arms he uses to keep Will warm.

He stays awake long after Will drifts to sleep, the embers of arousal blinking away one by one.

It is nearing dawn when he is woken again to a shifting warmth and a sharp scent. They must have rolled over in slumber because Will is now wrapped around his back. His hands have settled to bruise at Hannibal's hips, pulling to shift Hannibal's ass just a little closer, enough to offer something to rut against.

'What have we been dreaming?' Hannibal muses roughly, hiding his grin in the pillow.

Will says something that sounds like *shut up*. He is too far buried between Hannibal's shoulder blades to enunciate.

Hannibal has been dreaming of something perfectly pleasant and forgettable and would be quite content to return to it; but he will not allow Will to exhaust himself chasing relief in this base, unrewarding manner. With a grunt, he rolls them once more and presses Will back into his body. He twines one arm around his chest like a vice; he folds a leg between his legs and forces them apart until Will's right heel slides on the covers for purchase and his knee points sharply at the ceiling.

Will struggles just enough to drive his ass firmly into Hannibal's crotch. His eyes are wide and reflective, like the surface of a dark lake on a summer's night.

'Hannibal,' he complains, in the tone of a child whose favourite toy has been taken away.

Hannibal wraps a hand around his throat. He doesn't bear down—Will has enough trouble working his throat as is—but Will's legs kick out at the sheets all the same, hips jerking in a frenzied search until Hannibal presses down with his thigh and stills them.

'I think I need to get this taken care of,' he murmurs into Will's ear, 'or I won't be able to sleep in peace.'

He slips his hand under the waistband of Will's shorts. He doesn't tease, fairly certain that Will lacks the patience for it. Instead, he tightens his fingers around Will's cock and, to the sound of Will's cut-off moan, imagines what it might feel like to have Will do the same. Hannibal's hands are warm, but Will's take a long while to recover after their walks; he could corner Hannibal on the porch, one gloved hand pulling at his hair, the other bared and shockingly cold as it closes in a bruising grip—glove still between his teeth—

Hannibal jerks him off hard and steady, like all he cares for is getting the job done, holding Will so closely contained between limbs that it is impossible for him to move to or away from the hand's persistence. When he is close, Will digs the fingers of both hands into Hannibal's forearm, ten nails burning desperation into blushing skin, and when Hannibal doesn't let up as he orgasms, he tries to buckle and kick his way out. Hannibal doesn't alter the rhythm until the final aftershocks ease.

Once he's relaxed his arms and slipped the leg free, Will stretches like a cat left too long in the sun, yawns, and pulls the duvet back over himself.

'Will,' Hannibal prods. 'Come, we have to clean you up.'

Will doesn't bother opening his eyes. 'Says who?' he scoffs, though it is rendered sweet by the hoarseness in his voice. 'You say?'

'I say.'

Will blows a particularly wet raspberry, then chuckles at his own insolence.

The floors, Hannibal knows, are exceptionally cold at night, and the bed that houses Will is warm and welcoming. But it is hardly reasonable to sleep the hours until morning in soiled underwear: the semen will crust into the fabric, and stick Will's pubic hair into painful clumps, and seep chill into his bladder.

Hannibal rises, fetches Will a new pair of shorts, a box of wet wipes and a towel, then fights against his reluctance until he is made clean, dry and left snoring softly.

In the morning Hannibal waits until Will has exiled himself to brush his teeth and dress. When he is certain he is alone, he buries his face in the sheets that hold captive the musty smell of Will's release. He tries not to think about the dogs having likely done much the same before him.

That becomes part of their routine, too.

The patients he hasn't lost get habituated to his altered schedule; the woman working the front desk at the pool asks Hannibal about the dogs; invitations and prodding messages from his society friends become fewer and fewer. Soon, Hannibal finds it odd to think his life has ever extended beyond Wolf Trap at all.

When his phone rings one evening as he's scrubbing their best pan, he picks up without so much as a glimpse at caller ID—the only people who call after working hours are Abigail and Alana, very rarely a patient—and he finds himself entirely unprepared for Mrs Komeda's trilling voice.

'Hannibal,' she chides in lieu of a *hello.* 'Months. It's been *months,* and now he picks up the phone as if nothing happened!'

He hesitates, searching for the tone best suited to such conversations. 'We saw each other at the opera in November.'

‘November, Hannibal! Why, it’s March—my good friend Samantha, do you remember Samantha? She’s Hiroji’s cousin—anyway, she’s convinced herself you’ve died. She was saying cancer, but I told her if anything, it was murder.’

Hannibal’s lip twitches. ‘Murder? Have you abandoned the crime genre for romances, if your work is no longer enough of a stimulant?’

‘Gossip and fiction are two separate appetites, my dear. I must satisfy both.’

The air behind Hannibal shifts and warms. When he looks up from the sink, he sees Will’s reflection watching him from the dark of the window. He forgets what he was about to say; he is suddenly forced to juggle two modes of being, and he isn’t sure which words and which inflections lie at the intersections.

‘That aside—are you well, Hannibal? I hope this break from company was only because we were beginning to bore you?’

‘You know very well you are incapable of boring anyone. But I assure you I am perfectly well. No attempts on my life have been made.’

‘Perfect. Then you can come to Samantha’s opening Friday night.’

‘Samantha who has convinced herself I am dying of cancer?’

‘She’s an artist,’ Mrs Komeda says dismissively. ‘Suffering is visually compelling on a man. But she has a good hand and a good eye, and they’re getting the good champagne.’

Hannibal catches Will’s eye in the window. His expression is inscrutable. Hannibal cannot shake the feeling that he is privately mocking him.

‘I would love to,’ he tells her quickly, infusing his voice with as much regret as he can squeeze in, ‘but I’m afraid I’ll be otherwise engaged.’

‘Bring your engagement along.’

‘That—’ Hannibal stutters. ‘I don’t think—’

‘Oh, don’t be a drag. She’s Hiroji’s cousin, it would make him so happy.’

Hannibal does not particularly care for being the harbinger of Mr Komeda’s happiness, nor does he find it likely this is a role he plays in anyone’s but Mrs Komeda’s mind—but he appreciates her too much to argue.

He also appreciates that were he to go, he would be leaving Will alone for a full evening. He would miss dinner. He might miss Will’s hands on his neck as well.

‘Please extend my sincere apologies to Mr Komeda,’ he says. ‘And do pass on my congratulations to Samantha. Perhaps another time.’

The sigh this produces peaks and breaks into unpleasant crackling over the connection. Hannibal puts a little more space between the phone and his ear.

‘Alright, alright. I won’t badger you anymore. Think about it and call me back. Friday at eight at the Goya Contemporary.’

She hangs up before Hannibal can argue again.

‘Who was that?’ Will’s dark reflection asks.

Hannibal returns his attention to the pan. ‘Mrs Komeda is an old friend. She was calling to tell me about a cousin’s gallery opening this Friday.’

‘You’re not going though.’

‘No.’

The answer must satisfy Will because he leaves the room without another word. A moment later, Hannibal hears the burst and hum of the shower.

He imagines he should be disappointed. He hasn’t had much opportunity for social engagement, and this seems like the perfect re-introduction into company. He’d get to wear something a little more sophisticated than sweaters and slacks, too.

He isn’t disappointed. He finishes scrubbing the pan, washes his hands, waits until Will’s steps sound on the stairs, and goes up to shower.

When he comes back down, he finds Will sat aimless on the bed. His eyes are heavy with unvoiced thought. His hair is still a little wet from the shower and lies plastered to his neck; Hannibal fights the instinct to return upstairs and fetch a hairdryer.

‘You should go,’ Will says, face blank.

Hannibal angles his head to the side, considering him. ‘I should?’ he humours, though he has no intention whatsoever of changing his mind.

Will’s shrug has the energy of a punch. ‘You would if I wasn’t here.’

‘You are here.’

A sneer. Will looks away from him.

Hannibal makes to fold his sweater into the armoire. The moment his back is turned, Will speaks again, this time without inflection any which way,

‘We both go then.’

Hannibal stills. He has anticipated a number of turns in this conversation: into self-pity, anger, mockery and a full-blown row. Not this.

He sets his sweater into the drawer, closes it, then walks over and lowers himself to perch on the bed by Will's side. When the mattress sags with his weight, Will edges away. He looks furious.

'This will be a gallery opening,' Hannibal says carefully. 'I am not familiar with the artist, but the gallery in question is well-known in Baltimore's artistic circles. Although this is an exclusive event, I imagine attendance will be in the dozens.'

'Oh,' Will barks, '*exclusive*. No, well, I wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of the various geometric figures of the Baltimore art world.'

Hannibal feels a flare of anger at the accusation. 'I have never implied you would embarrass me, Will. I only wonder whether this is an event you would enjoy—'

'Fine. I'm not going. You can go alone.'

'I don't want to go alone.'

'Too bad. Friday night, I'm holding an exclusive event with the dogs. I don't think you'd enjoy it.'

Hannibal struggles to not audibly sigh. He cannot imagine a scenario in which Will coming along would end well. Then again, Will has come a long way since panic attacks in the cafeteria, and if refusal translates so easily into rejection in his mind, there is little to be gained from holding his ground.

'I don't know if you will enjoy yourself, Will, but I would certainly enjoy myself more if you came with me.'

'No.'

'We don't need to stay long. We can leave at any time.'

'I'm not going.'

'Will,' Hannibal says dangerously.

Will throws himself back on the bed in dramatic surrender. '*Fine*. Ugh, do I have to wear a suit?'

It is difficult to hold onto anger when Will is stretched prone so close to him. But this is Will's bed and they don't touch on Will's bed. Hannibal pushes a foot into his ankle to abate the spike of heat in his stomach.

'You can wear whatever you like,' he assures.

That is not entirely the truth. There is no time to have anything properly made to order, but Hannibal insists on at least purchasing a new jacket and trousers, and perhaps a shirt or two. Will refuses to drive into Washington with him, so Hannibal takes his measurements himself, to a bevy of squirms and complaints. Yet when they are done, Will announces loudly he's

been thoroughly exhausted, kills the lights, and throws himself onto the floor mattress. Hannibal knocks a toe against a chair on his way to him, but it's worth it: Will's skin is blushed from Hannibal's earlier attentions, and he comes as soon as Hannibal's lips wrap around his cock.

In the end, he only manages to get one shirt adjusted to Will's fit, but the fabrics and colours he selects will still suit better than anything Will owns. Hannibal sincerely doubts that either of them will want to repeat Friday's excursion anytime soon, but in case disaster can be averted, he promises himself to be better prepared in the future.

On Friday afternoon, he drives to pick up the suit from Canali. The tailor initially recommended a plain navy fabric when advised Hannibal was shopping for a novice, but Hannibal would rather miss the event than allow Will to wear anything so dreadfully uninspired. They found at last a puppytooth suit in deep blue that glistens with a purple tint in the light. The jacket has a softer, Neapolitan shoulder to ease the tension Will is sure to carry in his back, kissing stacked cuff buttons, and patch pockets for a casual touch. Hannibal lays it out on Will's bed when he arrives home and finds himself satisfied. He's bought a tie too, a beautiful baby blue in a glencheck so fine you can barely make it out, and brought over from Baltimore a champagne gold pocket square that he knew would form a perfect match. He folds it now into a reverse puff and slips it into the jacket for the full effect. It looks like the flower of a crown.

His own outfit is a suit he's worn before, but never to an opening. Normally he'd consider it a little too much on the casual side for such an event, but the rusty oranges are a perfect complement to Will's colours, and he can't very well put on a tuxedo if Will isn't going to wear one.

Despite the considerable sacrifice to dress down, he spends an hour talking Will into wearing the clothes he's bought him. The tie is a lost cause—Will wrenches it loose the moment it is on him and accuses Hannibal of trying to strangle him—and though he enjoys it when Hannibal runs gelled fingers through his hair to arrange the locks into something more like locks and less like a nest of dark energy, he becomes hyper-fixated on what the product feels like on his head after and eventually they wash it off. His facial hair becomes a point of contention too, not because Will refuses to shave, but because he insists on doing so *himself*, and naturally cuts right across the chin, spilling blood all over the sink and Hannibal's favourite towel.

Hannibal shucks his own tie—it would look an affront to Will's slip of bare throat—and ties a cravat instead. He wipes the sink clean. He finishes up Will's shave and puts a skin-toned plaster on the cut and then all is well, except that the sight of Will's face unobscured and clear is marred by a frown of failure. He stays silent as they pack themselves into the car and grows progressively more fidgety over the course of the drive. Hannibal is near ready to pre-emptively deem the evening a failure. Will doesn't enjoy reminders of his various limitations, and he is sure to butt into several more tonight.

The Goya Contemporary is tonight a space studded with glitter and the overwhelming scent of perfume. Like flocks of birds, invitees twirl around silver platters of hors d'oeuvres. They are single-minded and alike, clad in blacks, whites, silvers and golds. Hannibal is suddenly

grateful that Will's simple attire forced him to forego a tuxedo: with monochromes and careful elegance dominating the room, the two of them form a single point of bold colour, and heads are already turning to trace their trajectory.

Hannibal cannot see the Komedas yet, but he recognizes many others gathered here, and smiles and nods are being sent his way from all directions. He returns them, skin tingling with the forgotten pleasures of attention. To them, he is a secret: they trace his steps back to tailors, designers and continents; they will go home tonight and dream mad tales of the identity of the man at his side. Some have been guests at his dinner table, where they devoured the tender meat of their friends like they'd been famished for that very delicacy; others have only heard of them and lust after an invitation, hoping for an opportunity to either partake in the mystery or to mock and dismiss it.

This is a thing about secrets Hannibal has forgotten: keeping them need not be a burden. It can instead be a savage pleasure. He decides here and now that he will find his next victim at tonight's event. He will walk by Will's side and make his introductions, and he will tell him about the people they meet and about the pieces they see, and all the while he will be a predator bidding his time in the bushes, poised to leap to an exposed throat. And Will is never going to know.

The things Will can never know shimmer golden to Hannibal now that he's forced himself to examine them again. To Will, Hannibal is his most loyal and obliging protector. There isn't a moment when he'd fear him, not when Hannibal wields the knife in the kitchen, not when he talks back to him in a darkened corridor, not ever—and he *should*. He should because Hannibal has orchestrated it all: Will's dependence on Hannibal, his confusion, his helplessness. Will is where he is because Hannibal has decided so, and he is who he is because Hannibal made him. He thinks he has fallen into Hannibal's lap by forces of circumstance and then willed himself to stay there; he has no idea his will is but a product of Hannibal's imagination.

As easily as he has done everything since, he directs Will to stand in front a frame in a further corner of the room—his shoulder relaxes when it feels Hannibal's hand, and Will's step adjusts immediately to the unspoken command. Hannibal picks up two flutes of champagne. When he presses one into Will's hand, it opens to him like a flower in bloom.

Will doesn't immediately lift the glass to his lips. Instead, he watches the canvas cautiously, like he's expecting it to start moving.

'It's titled, *Two,*' Hannibal reads off the plaque, delighted when it makes Will grimace. The work is an entirely abstract sketch in charcoal, and the title gives no clues as to how it is meant to be read. 'Do you like it?'

Will must catch a flash of his amusement, because he bristles. 'Oh, no. What's my line now? Right, modern art is stupid. No one's paying *me* money for doodling on a piece of paper. Why can't artists draw dogs or sunsets instead?'

'All valid critical points,' Hannibal allays. 'Though I will point out that not all modern art is necessarily abstract.'

‘Shut up.’

Hannibal isn’t a fan of abstractionism himself—he prefers his art living and palpable—but he recognizes saying so now would only sound more patronising, and Will’s control stands on a knife’s edge already.

He leads them to another piece, this one a portrait. The next, an expanse of forest. The exhibits seem to share little beyond technique—all charcoal sketches drawn in an easy hand—but there is soul in them, and Hannibal appreciates a personality.

Will affords every image the same careful consideration. The longer they are faced away from the crowd, the gentler the lines around his mouth become, and soon Hannibal can glimpse in his smooth jaw and parted lips a younger man, unsure about his place in the world but drinking it in until he is unsteady.

‘Your verdict?’ Hannibal asks as they approach the final sketch, this one a rendition of a night sky.

Will gives a single nod, then says, ‘I like yours better.’

Hannibal blinks. He—

‘Excuse me. Doctor Lecter?’

It takes great effort to turn. Before him stands a tall man with deep eyes and an immaculate presence; Hannibal immediately likes his suit and his poise but dislikes how close he is standing.

‘Forgive me for intruding.’ He says it like he is confident he is not intruding, or at least that making his acquaintance will make any intrusion worth it. ‘But my friend couldn’t bear it if we didn’t get a chance to talk tonight. He’s told me all about you.’

From behind him appears a sight even less welcome than the interruption: Franklyn is smiling at him shyly. His hair has been pressed flat at the front and curled down the sides, and together with the understated yet classy tuxedo, they form the perfect picture of trying just hard enough.

‘Franklyn,’ Hannibal greets him. ‘What a surprise.’

He says it so flatly it is obvious to everyone he is not surprised. Franklyn has the decency to look chastised. Hannibal *knew* he should have insisted on referring him weeks ago—it has long been only a matter of time before this interest escalated. But Franklyn never made an issue of his limited availability and hastily rescheduled sessions, and Hannibal wanted to reward the consideration.

It is Will’s fault, really. Hannibal mentioned to Franklyn he was heading to Washington after their session to pick up a suit for an event, and he thinks now that must have said it was an opening. It wouldn’t have taken much for Franklyn to dig around for details. He would never have made the mistake if he hadn’t been so excited to put Will in new clothes.

Since it is largely Will's fault and not Franklyn's, Hannibal decides to be graceful. 'I have to say this is a fantastic tux,' he praises. Franklyn straightens like someone's yanked him up by a string. 'I would ask for the name of your tailor, but I am more curious about the name of your friend.'

'Tobias Budge,' the man introduces himself swiftly. His hand settles on Hannibal's like a vice. 'It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person.'

'Thank you.' At Hannibal's side, Will shifts his weight. Hannibal suddenly doesn't want to introduce him at all, not to Franklyn and not even to Tobias Budge, at least not before he has proven himself to be in any way interesting.

But Tobias is already extending his hand to Will in turn, who mutters his name and accepts, and then stiffens just around the jaw when Tobias's long fingers clamp around his wrist. Hannibal has no need to look at Will's face to recognize the twitch of pain—he feels it in his scent, in the energy where their bodies stand close—so he chooses to watch Tobias's features instead. The flash of satisfaction behind the eyes is unmistakeable: he was waiting for Will to wince.

That is, Hannibal supposes, a little interesting. But this run-of-the-mill sadism is hardly uncommon and hardly worth the performance of grandeur that Tobias Budge carries on him; even Will, with all his sweetness, isn't immune to such a thing.

'My apologies,' Hannibal says. 'That's our hostess there—we must go pay our respects before she disappears into the fold or we might not catch her again. I hope you enjoy your evening.'

He leads Will through the crowd toward the centre of the room, where indeed Mrs Komeda and her entourage are engaged in glass clinking and chatter. Will doesn't resist and he doesn't ask him about Franklyn; he appears deep in thought, though where it is he's gone Hannibal cannot tell.

Mrs Komeda throws herself into introductions, pushing hands into shakes and rattling the rubies that hang heavily from her ears. 'Hannibal, you've met my husband Hiroji, of course, and Samatha—tonight's star, so you'll have to forgive her if she doesn't stay with us long—and this is Dr June Miller, we've only just been introduced, but she works in your field, I believe, Hannibal, and this is doctor, oh, forgive me—'

'Doctor Frederick Chilton. I head the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.'

'Ah, you'll have to tell me your stories later,' Mrs Komeda exclaims. 'Not for everyone's ears, I imagine—but I write crime novels, you see—'

'Of course,' Frederick obliges. Though he is speaking to her, his eyes are fixed on Will. 'But there's no need for introductions: Doctor Lecter and I are already acquainted.'

'Oh, you've met?'

‘In passing,’ Hannibal amends quickly. He *has* had Frederick over for dinner and it is blatantly rude to act as though he has forgotten, but Will has stilled next to him with his eyes anywhere but on the man’s face, and suddenly Hannibal wants nothing more than to distance himself from Doctor Frederick Chilton. ‘I didn’t realize you had an interest in the arts, Doctor Chilton.’

‘Oh, I’ve had great love for art since I was a boy. But you know how it is, Doctor Lecter, for those of us who see work as their calling—I am just now beginning to carve out some time for the pleasures of life.’

‘As you should.’ He can feel Will inching closer to him, anxiety seeping out of his every pore. ‘Calling or no, workaholics are rarely good company.’

Samantha hides a smile in her champagne. Though he strives not to show it, Hannibal does not remember her—she is young, barely out of college, and wouldn’t have spent many nights at black-tie events. She is not striking, either, hidden behind a closed-off face and large glasses—but now that he has seen her work, he wants to peel that away and glimpse the warm flesh inside.

‘But I don’t believe I’ve met your companion, Hannibal,’ Mrs Komeda diverts, with all the subtlety of an elephant. ‘I am sure I would remember him quite well if I had.’

Hannibal has spent much of the drive pondering over how to introduce Will. They have not discussed their relationship, so labelling it now might be presumptuous. On the other hand, if the aim of tonight’s exercise is to make Will feel secure, then announcing him Hannibal’s partner would be justifiable.

He hesitates for a fraction of a second, but it is enough: Will notices.

‘Will Graham,’ he butts in, the faint tremble of his voice lain with faux confidence.

Will and Mrs Komeda exchange pleasantries while Hannibal decides this is for the best. It should not have been a question in the first place: Hannibal is hardly going to acknowledge a relationship with someone who deigns at best to visit him in a nest on the floor whenever he wishes to be serviced. He almost hopes Mrs Komeda might ask and that Will might be the one to use a label only for Hannibal to interject. *Well, of a sort,* he might say. It would be unspeakably rude. Reason dictates that Will would either not care or get angry, but Hannibal privately imagines him crying about it later.

The questions start then: Mrs Komeda wishes to know how Will and he met (Will can’t remember), what Will does (nothing, a source of increasing angst), what he thinks of Samantha’s art (not as good as Hannibal’s, that’s what he said then, but he doesn’t say it *now*). Will bites the inside of his cheek and fumbles with the lining of his right pocket, and though Hannibal attempts to ease things along, he must inevitably betray truths about Will along the way that he would clearly prefer to keep hidden.

But if he does not mention a health scare and Will’s subsequent departure from his work for the FBI, there isn’t very much to say about Will that Hannibal has any interest in sharing.

After a moment's hesitation, he twines his fingers through Will's where his hand hovers at his hip, and hopes the touch is grounding enough.

Eventually, Mrs Komeda picks up on Will's reluctance and engages Doctors Chilton and Miller in a discussion on stab wounds. Hannibal turns to compliment Samantha on her work. Once he gets her talking, he feels Will relax at his side: whether that is because the spotlight has moved off him or because he is not expected to have an opinion on working with charcoal, he's not sure. His cheeks colour with alcohol and his teeth show through his smile when he accepts another glass. Hannibal straightens instinctively whenever he feels the gaze of a man or woman from across the room, and edges closer to Will, and angles his body to make sure any curious glances land on their linked hands.

Soon, Samantha is pulled away into a fresh conversation. Mrs Komeda follows her like a bodyguard—the fact she has left her to converse with Hannibal alone was apparently a show of trust. Doctor Chilton smells the opportunity and is already rounding on them, slowed only by Mr Komeda's half-hearted attempts at wit.

'What's his name?' Will whispers into Hannibal's ear.

'Doctor Chilton's?'

'Mhm.'

Hannibal tries to catch his eye, but Will doesn't let him. 'Do you remember meeting him before?'

'I don't know. I remember him—sort of like I remembered you at first. No real memories, just—a sense.'

Hannibal wants to ask Will to describe this sense he had about him, in detail. Instead he asks, 'What is this sense telling you now?'

'That he's a fucking nightmare.'

Hannibal's face pulls to trap the laugh.

Chilton leads with a smile that's a fraction too bright to feel real. Hannibal considers telling him to start paying his dentist less. He wouldn't say it. But it would make Will laugh.

'Mr Graham,' he says through the grin. 'I didn't get a chance to ask after your health. I didn't want to pry, not in company—but now that it's just us—' he lowers his voice, edging closer. Will's hand tightens around Hannibal's. 'Word's reached me that you suffered some sort of—ah—mental break.'

'And whose word was that?' Hannibal asks lightly, already shuffling through recipe cards.

'Oh, I don't know, *word* gets around. But no one really knows—I had that journalist, what was her name, Lount? Lounds. She came knocking on *my* door of all places, hoping to find *you* in my facility!'

He says it like the idea is outrageous only because it is so delightful. Hannibal presses a thumb into the thin skin over Will's wrist and feels his pulse drumming into crescendo.

'I can't fathom why Miss Lounds would. Will fell gravely ill and had to be hospitalized.'

'It was neurological,' Will interjects sharply. His eyes are steel. 'Encephalitis.'

'I see!' Chilton exclaims. 'She did mention rumours about your progression into—well, I don't want to offend, but of course encephalitis *would* produce some spectacular neurological symptoms. I think she was chasing a story about a descent into a life of crime. Preposterous but believable—it's not as though there isn't a string of unresolved murders left in your wake, but you said you're not going back to the FBI, are you?'

'I—I don't—' Will's champagne glass trembles dangerously in his hand. 'No, I'm not going to—to—'

He looks to Hannibal for help, but Hannibal can supply a word, not a full statement, and it seems as though Will's ability to decide what he wishes to say has gone completely.

Hannibal takes his champagne away.

'I believe what Will is trying to say is that he is not planning on re-joining the FBI. I would also imagine he is less than interested in hearing of Miss Lounds' conjectures.'

'No, of course,' Chilton nods sagely. 'It must be so difficult for you, Will. And with this level of aphasia, he can't very well go back to teaching either. It's good of you to take him places, Doctor Lecter, even if you have to play translator. Mental stimulation is key to recovery.'

Hannibal finds himself entirely incapable of speech. Will's eyes glisten with the unshed tears of humiliation.

'In any case, I wanted to say that my thoughts go out to you, Will. Recovery is a painful process, but there's a light at the end of any tunnel.'

Then, Chilton reaches out and gives Will a pat on the elbow.

Hannibal sees *red.*

Before he can decide whether it is best to wait for Chilton in the restroom or by his car, Will shakes off his trance.

He nods. He smiles.

'Yeah.' His tone is all softness. 'Uhm—oh, it's—same thing again, sorry, there's a word I'm —Hannibal, what's the word I'm looking for? Is it—is it *fuck you?* Fuck you. Yeah, I think that's right.'

Whatever Chilton's reaction is, Hannibal misses it completely, because Will is now looking up through his lashes, and he bites his lip coyly like he's still playing at confusion, and he

repeats, ‘Is that the one, Hannibal?’ And Hannibal is nodding at him before he realizes. Is it bedtime already? It will be by the time they get home—they should go *now.*

Will uses the opportunity presented by Hannibal’s delayed processing and steals a sip from the glass held loosely in Hannibal’s hand. The motion tips it off-balance and sends champagne dripping down Hannibal’s wrist. He wakes up with a hiss.

‘Will,’ he scolds, snatching a napkin from a passing waiter and dabbing at the alcohol before it can reach his cuff. ‘I think you’ve had enough. I’m taking you home.’

‘Oh no.’

‘Doctor Chilton,’ Hannibal nods: though he is still very much planning on ridding Earth of the man, there is no reason to forget basic courtesy, even if Will is pulling on his hand like a newly tethered beast.

They stop on their way out to thank Mrs Komeda and Samantha for the invitation, then use the facilities before the drive home. Hannibal’s reflection stares back at him from the mirror with reddened cheeks and a glaze over the eyes. He feels like he is only half here, but equally as though he has never been anywhere else in his life. It has been an hour since he’s had his single glass of champagne, so it can’t be that he’s drunk—but he feels it in his neck, in his heart. Will jerks himself sideways to avoid walking into the doorjamb and stumbles; when Hannibal steadies him with hands at his hips, it is as though he’s borrowed his tunnel vision.

In the car, Will dozes. A line of whites peers from beneath his loose eyelids. His breath is a steady whistle, each exhale a taste of champagne. Hannibal imagines driving like this on a road that leads to nowhere, forever. Then, he imagines pulling up at the nearest exit and getting Will into the backseat. ‘You’ll be more comfortable there,’ Hannibal would say, hushing his grumbling as he walked with eyes half-shut. ‘There’s a blanket in the trunk; we have a long way ahead of us.’

Will would curl on his side, pulling the blanket tight, fast slipping into renewed sleep—and Hannibal would pry his arms away from his chest, would ease his legs open, would stretch him out as much as the space allowed and murmur soothing praise into his ear as he pulled the button on his pants open—

He curls his toes in his shoes, bears down on the accelerator, and drives on.

At home, Will announces there is no point to showering again and drops to his bed. His request for pyjamas is unpleasant, to try and cover up the fact he’s forgotten where to look. Hannibal fetches him a fresh T-shirt and shorts and lays both out on the bed.

He should be going upstairs to change, too. But he doesn’t want to move, not even when Will raises an eyebrow at him.

‘Are you going to stand there and gawk?’ he asks.

There’s something in his voice that makes Hannibal feel brave.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘Will that be an issue?’

‘I mean, it’s creepy as hell.’ Will pulls off his jacket and throws it at him. ‘But you do you. Can you, uh—’

He doesn’t normally wear button-downs, and these are tiny glints of mother of pearl, particularly filigree. Hannibal hangs up the jacket and comes to help. His fingers are trembling.

‘Relax,’ Will grins at his fumbling. ‘You’re bound to do a better job than the invalid.’

‘Shush.’ Hannibal manages to get the second button open. Will’s nipples show from between the shirt’s folds. He is electrified with the thought that he has never touched them before, not like *that*—Will never removes his shirt at night, not ever—but tonight—

When he stops thinking about them, the final three buttons pop out without issue. ‘Impressive,’ Will whistles.

Hannibal eases open the button on his pants, then the zipper. Will doesn’t say anything, just breathes a little faster, so Hannibal pulls them down past his knees, and his underwear next.

‘Sit, please,’ he instructs. Will sits on the edge of the bed, then lies on his back to make it easier for Hannibal to pull his socks off. He tried to convince him to wear the silk socks he’d bought to go with the suit, but Will locked himself in the bathroom until he gave up. They’d be nicer to run his hands over as he massaged Will’s feet.

‘Next time,’ Hannibal tells him, ‘you’re wearing a tux.’

If he wore a tux, he would have to wear the silk socks—surely that much even Will could understand.

Will laughs, brilliant and clear. ‘Next time, I’m wearing sweats.’

‘You are not.’

Their eyes meet. For a flicker, Hannibal sees it: his knees sinking into the mattress of Will’s bed, draping himself over Will’s pillows, breathing in the scent of come from Will’s own sheets.

Then, it’s gone. Will gets off the bed and drifts across the dim until he is kneeling in front of Hannibal’s mattress, crawling over the fresh sheets, and finally reclining on his stomach. The lone light from the night lamp by the bed slides over the shifting lines of his shoulder blades, the dip in his back, the curve of his ass. Hannibal takes one step, then another; his earlier disappointment evaporates when he realizes Will isn’t going to ask him to turn the light off, and that he’ll be able to *see.*

Will watches him from the corner of his eye as Hannibal sheds his jacket, his waistcoat, his shirt. His right hand is pressed under his belly, but he doesn’t stroke, only bears down on it. His legs are speckled with fine hairs, but even those disappear into skin in the low light, and with his freshly shaved face he looks like a thing of porcelain—too perfect to be real.

‘Roll over,’ Hannibal whispers. Will does. The burst of black at his crotch was meant to reassure that he is flesh and life, but in that it fails. This is what Will looks like in Hannibal’s studies of form; what Greek heroes and gods look like in the reverential sketches from his school days. Perhaps he has walked straight off the pages. Perhaps Hannibal has made Will into who he is in more ways than he realizes.

The thought brings about a fresh wave of arousal, but it is tempered by the fear that blooms fast and cold in his gut.

He makes to remove his pants but pauses when he sees Will stiffen.

‘Enough for now?’ he asks.

‘Okay.’

‘I’ll just change into my pyjamas.’

‘Yeah.’

He faces away from Will as he does. He can feel the warmth of his gaze; it makes him nervous. He knows he should bend over properly to slip off the pants, that he should hold position long enough for Will to get his fill—it is only the polite thing. But he can’t force himself to do it, and in the end he lifts one foot after the other to hold himself straight. When he turns back around, Will hides his face in the pillow so quickly it’s almost convincing.

Hannibal sits astride him. He twines their fingers together, pressing them into the mattress the way he dreamed about in the car. He can feel Will’s hard-on through the thin fabric of his pyjama bottoms. He angles himself forward to let Will know he is similarly affected, then wraps his mouth around his left nipple.

Will moans into his ear. He is working his hips madly against Hannibal’s ass; Hannibal shifts his weight back to still him and Will groans.

‘Will,’ he warns. ‘No.’

A whine. Hannibal is unimpressed. Will is going to come *right,* in Hannibal’s mouth or fist, and that is the end of it.

‘You’re pissing me off,’ Will complains.

Hannibal finds that rather funny until Will starts pushing at his shoulders.

‘Get off,’ he’s saying. ‘Off.’

‘Will—’

‘Off.’

Hannibal moves off him. It is entirely unfair.

‘Jesus.’ Will tugs at Hannibal to lie flat on his back and climbs on top of him. ‘Happy now?’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal says quickly.

Will then sucks three kisses into Hannibal’s neck, so tight they are certain to show purple in the morning, and sets about stroking himself. Hannibal’s hands are batted away when he tries to take over, but he’s allowed to place them on Will’s thighs instead.

It would be frustrating if Hannibal could focus on the slight, but he cannot because Will is looking at him throughout—his eyes slide over Hannibal’s stomach, his chest, down the lines of his shoulders, to finally rest heavily on Hannibal’s face.

He comes over Hannibal’s stomach, staring Hannibal in the eye.

Hannibal isn’t sure he can make it till morning. Perhaps if he could get Will to go to the bathroom, just for a minute—

‘You alright?’ Will wipes down his stomach with the corner of the bedsheet, like the disgusting little animal he is.

‘Yes,’ Hannibal says hoarsely.

Will falls asleep soon after, wrapped around Hannibal’s body, still naked and flushed. Hannibal finds socks to put on him and gets them another blanket, then spends a while imagining the things he might do to Doctor Frederick Chilton when he gets his chance. That, ultimately, is what sends him to sleep.

He is running late. His pockets are stuffed with candy—fast-melting squares of chocolate, gingerbread stars and marzipan hearts, mushroom cookies and vanilla curd cheese, even Will’s raspberry jello—he’s losing some along the way, but he doesn’t have the time to go back and pick them up. He knows they’re waiting for him. He knows they are hungry. The house bleeds yellow light on the tall snow. It wets Hannibal’s pants all the way to his knees.

The door is ajar. The floorboards screech under his weight.

He calls out a greeting in Lithuanian. It feels wrong. No voices sound in response, and that strikes him as wrong too.

The first thing he sees are the dogs: too still on their beds. Not one of them is snoring. When Hannibal kneels at Winston’s side and lays a palm on his belly, he feels only a fading warmth. His hand comes away red.

Terror tightens around his stomach like a clawed fist. He runs into the study—he finds Alana folded over Will’s chair. She looks just fine at first, and he has a flash of hope that she might have fallen asleep waiting; but when he comes closer, he sees that her stomach is a raw wound, the caving where guts used to sit so deep it is impenetrable to the naked eye.

In the kitchen, Abigail is standing by the hob. Was she trying to prepare food in his absence? Have they gone so hungry?

He lays a hand on her shoulder to make his presence known, and then he sees it. She no longer has a throat: it's been torn out to carve a black well into her neck.

He stumbles away, pulling his singed hand close to his chest, and she crumbles to the ground, as though with his touch he has taken away the last aftereffects of life.

Through the haze of shock, he makes for the stairs, desperate to see though he already knows what he will find—and there, on the landing, Will lies pinned to the floor by a cruel foot bearing down on his throat, blood gurgling out through his gasping mouth, his ears, his nose.

Hannibal falls to his knees at his side, choking on terror. He pushes at the foot to dislodge it, but it won't budge. Will's bright blue eyes drift up to meet his. There's no fight left in him. He is dying and he knows it; he was always going to, in the end.

When the light blinks off behind his face, Hannibal does nothing. He only watches.

The foot lets go. Will's body falls loose and limp.

Hannibal looks up.

He is standing above him, dressed in a black so uniform it is shadow more than it is clothing. His face is stained a dark, arterial red; the ends of his curls stick together with blood.

He blinks at Hannibal with eyes void and deep, and smiles like Hannibal's Will would never smile.

Hannibal doesn't wait. He throws himself down the stairs, he crawls to standing, he sprints through the house—but the rooms are no longer where they are supposed to be, repeating over and again like the colours in a kaleidoscope, and he can *feel* him closing in—

Something jams into the back of Hannibal's head. He falls face-forward onto the floor, the pain sharp and real—a foot kicks at his side to make him roll over—

'So,' the Other Will says. He's holding a rifle, smeared with Hannibal's blood. 'Your turn now, huh?'

Half-remembering a dream, Hannibal starts emptying his pockets, hands shaking as he offers him all the candy he has—it was going to feed three people, surely it will satisfy one—but the Other Will only laughs.

'Is it not enough?' Hannibal pleads.

'That wasn't our deal,' he tuts. 'You need to pay attention to what I'm saying to you, Hannibal.'

Hannibal nods quickly. The Other Will grins like he knows he's being placated—like he knows it won't work.

He points the rifle at Hannibal's knee and pulls the trigger.

Blinding pain shoots through him, the kind of pain that isn't meant to be felt in dreams. Hannibal tries to push it back off the edges of awareness but he's slipping: his pant leg is wet and sticks hot to skin, and then the Other Will is on him at once, nails sharp as claws drawing blood to every new crevice, every new fold in Hannibal's once-smooth body. Bruises bloom on Hannibal's face and when he chokes, it isn't so much on the pain as it is on the *too-muchness* of it, on how many sensations are pouring into him at once, on how furiously diligent the Other Will is in his brutality.

Death is edging ever so closer with every breath, but Hannibal feels no fear—he has never been afraid of death. Everyone else is dead already: what difference does it make that he leaves an empty world?

But then, the assault ceases. Will stands.

'Goodbye, Hannibal,' he says.

And he leaves him, alive and alone.

Hannibal lurches awake. Breath is knotted somewhere in his stomach.

He sits up, peering from one dark into the next, convincing himself over and again that every corner is empty of the Other Will's smile.

'Hannibal?'

His Will is pushing himself up to sit, unsteady in new lucidity. Hannibal stares at him, wanting to speak but not yet able. Then, he identifies the prickling feeling on his cheeks, and wipes at them quickly. The distant shame of it is what persuades him he is awake and real.

There is one thing he must see for himself in any case. *He took the gun,* Will Graham once warned him. On trembling legs, he rises from the floor and crosses the room to where Will's rifle is supposed to sit, there over the fireplace. It does. He runs his fingers over it, just once, just to make sure.

The Other Will did not take it. Of course he didn't. They have it here still, for what little good it does them: Hannibal doesn't know the first thing about firing a gun, and he has to assume Will would have forgotten too.

He tries to remind himself the Other Will is only a thing he tells stories about. But right now, as he stands shivering on the cold floor, wishing he could go back to bed but unable to turn around and face Will, Hannibal feels less real than the black-eyed intruder who leaves gifts on porches and sneers at candy.

He hears movement behind him. Will manifests with a glass of water and a box of tissues. He speaks only to mutter a curse when some of the water spills on the floor as it's passed from hand to hand, and to whisper a thank you when he pulls the used tissue from Hannibal's hand and drops it in the fireplace.

Hannibal doesn't say anything at all.

Back in bed, Will holds him close and strokes his hair until it is unbearable and he must be thrown off. Hannibal rolls to face away from him, knowing he will not sleep again otherwise, but he wraps his fingers around Will's wrist when he pulls an arm around him and nuzzles into his back. He reminds himself that this is what real feels like.

The morning that follows is just as any morning. Will lets the dogs out, Hannibal picks out their clothes for the day, then gets started on breakfast. When over the sizzle of milk in the pot he hears the first notes of Will's fumbling upstairs, he returns to press his face into the sheets like it's any other day. It is.

And if the Other Will's smile, stretched and thin and mocking, flashes in front of his eyes as he comes—well.

That can be a secret, too.

Chapter End Notes

This one was a lot of fun to write, so I hope you enjoyed the brief respite from drama!

Next time, peace is threatened and Abigail re-enters the story.

The Wolves

Chapter Summary

Jack Crawford gets in the way of a murder. Abigail pays a visit to Wolf Trap.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirteen: The Wolves.

One thing quickly becomes clear: Frederick Chilton's mornings are horrifyingly dull.

Hannibal rarely hunts during the day, but where needs must he too is capable of run-of-the-mill sneakiness: he rents an inconspicuous Honda, he fills his calendar with names of patients he is no longer regularly seeing, and he borrows Will's American Eagles jacket to cover his three-piece. There is an added thrill to stalking prey in the light of day, which reminds him of his youth in Florence—a reckless, obstinate time. Today, he is neither reckless nor obstinate —he is merely *bold.*

Doctor Chilton foregoes breakfast entirely, which irks Hannibal so terribly he has to clutch at the zipper of the jacket, stuck half-way up his chest where it struggles to accommodate his shoulders, just to stop himself from acting rashly. Instead, he follows Chilton's car as he drives six miles to get his morning coffee, a fact Hannibal might understand if the first gleam of expense shielded anything other than a perfectly plebeian establishment. Frederick holds up the line for a solid five minutes, changes his mind thrice, and orders at last a mocha latte with whipped cream, looking around to make sure no familiar face is there to bear witness.

From his seat by the restroom door, features concealed under a looser fringe and a winter hat pulled too low, Hannibal witnesses each little sin. He imagines recounting them for Will later. He'd think the whole thing ridiculous. He might also be baited into making Hannibal a *caffè mocha* if Hannibal were careful about it.

Next, he follows Frederick back home. The walls on his lounge are see-through glass, which makes Hannibal's task laughably easy: he watches him choose a tie, choose a book, choose a recliner. He sees him shuck the tie and the book five minutes into his leisure, snagging instead the laptop off the coffee table—the bright colours of a video playing reflect off the crystals in the ostentatious chandelier, wholly incongruent with the soulless minimalism of the house's furnishings.

He doesn't do a thing more over the next two hours.

Hannibal is being bold, yes, but he cannot take a man out of an exhibitionist's glass box and expect no one to notice.

This is why these things are meant to be done at night, he thinks. The mere tone of the thought reminds him distinctly of what he sounds like when Will exasperates him.

But Will *is* to blame for this. While still on the steroids Hannibal has now grown to miss, he used to pass the nights in a heavy and exhausted sleep. Now, he guards. Any time Hannibal dares as much as sit up to rearrange the duvet, to edge ajar or pull shut a window at a change in weather, to fetch socks or water or double-check if he's put the marinate into the fridge—or, the ultimate insult, if he dares to venture to the bathroom—seven dogs raise their heads and blink cautiously before returning to sleep. But once Will's head is up, it refuses to go down until Hannibal has returned, been interrogated and huffed at for his *daintiness*.

He is seriously considering giving up for the day—it's not a perfect solution, but if he makes driving into the coffeeshop a habit, perhaps Hannibal might simply go scout out the parking lot some other day—when Frederick glances at his watch, sets his laptop aside, and picks up the tie.

Wherever he is going is bound at least to sport fewer glass walls. Hannibal starts up the engine.

Then, his phone rings.

'Will,' he says roughly. 'I am a little busy.'

Will bristles immediately. 'Don't pick up then,' he snaps. There's an edge to his voice. 'Jack's here.'

'Jack,' Hannibal repeats dully. The single word is salvation enough for Doctor Chilton. 'Why?'

'I don't know, ask *him*. Said he's got questions for me.'

Hannibal's blood runs cold. What questions could Jack possibly have to ask Will?

'Can you come back?' Will mutters, only half-audible.

'Yes, of course.' Hannibal is adding up transit times already: he still needs to drive back to his office to get the Bentley. 'I'll call Alana. If she's in Quantico, she'll get there faster.'

'No, wait, don't—'

Hannibal hasn't the time to listen to his protests. 'I'm on my way,' he assures, and hangs up.

He plugs the phone into the car's front panel and scrolls for Alana's number as he starts rolling down the road. He can see Doctor Chilton getting into his Jaguar in the rear-view mirror; what timing Jack Crawford has.

'Alana. Are you in Quantico?'

Alana knows business when she hears it. 'Yes,' she responds simply.

‘Jack has paid Will an impromptu visit. I’m at least an hour away.’ That’s if he speeds, and Hannibal detests speeding. ‘Apparently he has need to ask Will some questions.’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake!’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m on my way—I’ll try to stall him as much as I can.’

‘Thank you.’

He turns on the radio and pushes up the volume to drown out any stray theories. There is no use in mapping out contingencies; whatever has brought Jack to their doorstep should be news to Hannibal, and the best thing he can do is react to it in the moment.

Instead, he thinks about how Will must worry. He is very good at worrying. Hannibal considers calling to remind him where his Xanax is but decides that would only agitate him more.

Both Jack’s and Alana’s cars are parked in front of the house when he pulls up. Animation builds inside until the door is inched open so that Lana, Casper and Zoe can bolt through and set about greeting him—Hannibal recognizes Will’s fingers curled around the frame.

The fingers disappear before Hannibal reaches the threshold. He follows the ghost of Will deeper into the house, where he finds them all: Jack sat in one of the armchairs in the study, Alana and Will leaning side-by-side against the desk, arms crossed at the chest. Winston lies at Will’s feet; when Hannibal enters, he looks up at him as if wanting to ask what took him so long.

‘Alana.’ Hannibal bows his head. ‘And Jack. It has been a while since—’

‘Are you wearing my jacket?’

Hannibal looks down at the garment, still half-zipped at his chest. ‘Yes,’ he says, because there really is nothing else to say.

Will’s expression is fast transforming into something Hannibal needs neither Jack nor Alana witnessing, so he changes topic. ‘To what do we owe this visit?’

‘I’m actually here to talk to Will,’ Jack grumbles, ‘but apparently that’s not an option anymore.’

Will is expressly avoiding so much as looking Jack’s direction. Hannibal walks over to the desk to put a bodily shield between them. He is gratified when Will shuffles sideways to give him a few extra inches to lean against.

‘Since we’re all here,’ Jack begins evenly; Will grimaces with some stray emotion. ‘I guess I’m telling all of you now. We found the body of Nick Boyle yesterday.’

Hannibal keeps his face carefully slack: his genuine reaction to the news is too complex to leave room for manufactured surprise.

‘Who’s Nick Boyle?’

‘He was a murder suspect in a case we worked together,’ Hannibal explains, his voice too monotone in the circumstances. He needs to start doing better fast or Will is going to notice. ‘He went missing before he could be brought in for questioning.’

‘He went missing right after attacking Abigail Hobbs,’ Jack butts in. ‘An important detail, considering.’

Will stiffens at the mention of Abigail’s name. He starts opening his mouth to ask but shuts it back quickly—Hannibal is certain he’s saving it for when they’re alone.

‘Where was he found?’

‘Frozen stiff in the woods just north of Baltimore. Snow melted and he was right there. Curious location.’

‘Not especially,’ Hannibal disagrees. ‘Considering his obsession with Abigail, it makes sense that he would find out she’d been moved to Baltimore and follow.’

What *is* curious is that Hannibal and Abigail buried the body under a significant amount of ground, and unless that’s thawed away alongside the frost, this means Nick Boyle’s final resting place has been interfered with. A quiet anger boils in him at the very thought.

‘And what does Will have to do with this?’ Alana’s anger isn’t managed nearly as well as Hannibal’s. ‘He was with you when we last saw Nick Boyle. If anything, you should be interrogating *me,* or Hannibal.’

‘No one is interrogating anyone. You’ve both given statements. You might have to give them again in due course, but I’m more interested in anything we didn’t think to ask last time. For example, like if you remember seeing this man, Will.’

He extends the photograph to Will, but Hannibal is the one who takes it. Nick Boyle’s face peers out of the frame, smooth and unconcerned—it’s a picture from another life, from before his sister was stolen away.

Hannibal meets Jack’s eye. This would be amusing if it weren’t bound to cost Will a week of sanity.

‘You think Will killed Nick Boyle.’

‘No, I think Abigail Hobbs killed Nick Boyle. But I *know* that this whole case is one big mess, and anyone as wrapped up in that as Will is has to be a suspect. Whoever killed Nick Boyle was close to this, that’s what I know. And these are questions that I need to ask.’

‘Abigail?’ Alana’s fingers clench around her shoulder. ‘What, she hunted down Nick Boyle *after* he attacked her? Is that the story? Or did she kill him back at the house and Hannibal

didn't notice?'

Hannibal says nothing, but he makes sure the offense radiates off the way he stands straighter. Jack looks away.

'This is an ongoing investigation,' he grumbles. 'But we know she has a habit of skipping the ward at night.'

Alana snorts. 'Breaking curfew—the true mark of a killer!'

'We're not here to talk about Abigail Hobbs. Will.' Jack dips his head to catch his eye, but Will stares resolutely at the floor. 'Anything you remember. You weren't yourself, we know that. If anything happened—if you did anything—and I'm not saying that you did, but I need to make sure—that wasn't on you. Hell, that'd be on me more than you. So I need to know. Do you understand?'

Will nods; he doesn't answer.

'Do you remember seeing this man?'

Will's *no* is barely audible, but the room is perfectly quiet. 'Alright,' Jack says. He takes the picture out of Hannibal's hand. 'Can I have a look around the house?'

'No,' Hannibal says immediately. He will not have Jack Crawford digging around their things, dispersing the scents buried in them, agitating the dogs. He has only just managed to introduce a system into the bathroom that guarantees human cosmetics and dog cosmetics are kept to separate shelves, and covertly disposed of Will's instant coffee stash—and then, of course, there's the matter of what's inside the freezer.

Jack glares at him. 'Last time I checked, this was Will's house,' he says. 'Will?'

Will draws in a breath. 'No.' He casts a glance at Hannibal, but it's too quick for Hannibal to catch his eye. 'Get a warrant if you have to.'

For all his stubbornness, Jack is an observant man and can spot a lost cause when he sees it.

'Okay.' He stands up. His scarf is still around his shoulders. 'You have my number. Call me if you remember anything, won't you?'

'Yeah.'

'Take care, Will.'

Hannibal walks him to the door. It's uneasy in a way they have never been before. But their old camaraderie was built on the strong foundation of a common concern for Will; and Hannibal's concern is no longer a thing he is willing to share.

'I apologize we couldn't be more helpful.'

Jack is putting on his hat, ready to brace the blinding sun outside. It's an elegant trilby with a fetching persian red feather on the side; it's a good choice for him.

'What do you think, Doctor?' He sounds tired. 'There any way he could have done it?'

'No.' Hannibal doesn't give it any consideration: he doesn't need to. But he knows what his conviction feels like in the tense air.

'Well,' Jack says. The door creaks under his hand. 'Let's hope you're right. Sorry for disturbing you.'

As Hannibal is turning away from the door, he is ambushed by Alana, the anger Jack has spurred still cinching in her eyes. She's pulling on her coat.

'I need to rush off,' she tells him. Her hair gets caught under the collar. He takes her handbag from her to free her hands.

'Thank you for coming.'

'Did you tell me the truth?'

Hannibal hesitates. He meets her eyes, but if an answer lies in them, he cannot read it. He is not Will Graham. 'What truth?' he probes, softening his voice as much as he can make it.

'About Nick Boyle. About what happened that night—or after.'

'You told Jack Crawford you did not suspect Abigail.' That she would lose faith in him so easily hurts, and he fixes his eyes on the wall behind her to swallow down the feeling. 'Or me.'

'I told Jack what I told Jack. But no, I don't think you'd be stupid enough to help Abigail cover up killing a man.' She crosses her arms over her chest, propping up her confidence. 'Helping Will is a different matter.'

Hannibal blinks. 'You are accusing Will then.'

'I am not accusing anyone. I am saying that I remember what he was like at the time. He doesn't, but I *do*. And it felt like he didn't know who he was half the time, not to mention what he was doing. If Jack is right and this was someone close to the investigation, then Will makes sense as a suspect. But he doesn't make sense as someone capable of hiding a murder from his psychiatrist, or of burying the body under three feet of snow.'

'You think I buried a body for him.'

'I don't know. Did you?'

'If I had,' Hannibal says slowly, eyes hard on hers, 'I assure you that no one would find it.'

She holds his gaze. Hannibal has the impression that she is trying to see through the iris and the skull right into his head. He wonders what it is she sees there.

‘Okay,’ she says finally. ‘I believe you.’

He cannot tell if she’s being honest.

‘I’m going to try and see Abigail this evening.’ Alana pries the handbag out of his hand; he finds he has gone quite stiff. ‘I can’t imagine what this is going to do to her.’

Hannibal also needs to see Abigail, and rather urgently considering she is apparently going around digging up bodies he has worked hard to bury. Especially if—what if this isn’t the end of them? If Abigail can act so rashly, if he cannot see through her decisions to the intention beneath them, if the people around him slip into suspicions that he has never planned for them—then she might well be the intruder, and Hannibal would never know.

He will feel much better once this is all cleared up, even if that means Abigail must be disposed of. He will tie the loose ends fast and he will wrap them into a bow on the whole sorry affair. Will is never going to have to think about it more than he is already.

But he *is* already thinking, and Hannibal can’t very well leave him to it.

He finds him pouring out what’s clearly not his first drink. The lines of his back show sharp through the thin fabric of the T-shirt; it’s warmer today and adrenaline has claimed Will’s sweater.

‘What?’ It is as though he can hear Hannibal’s frown.

Hannibal takes the bottle away, ignoring the dark look. Will downs his glass so fast he chokes on the whisky, just to make sure Hannibal can’t take that away too.

‘Talk,’ he says once he has stopped coughing his lungs out.

‘What would you like me to talk about?’

‘Hannibal.’

Hannibal sits him on the bed and takes him through it, day-by-day: taking Abigail to Minnesota, the copycat murders, the night that Nicholas Boyle attacked Abigail and ran—or so they thought. He doesn’t tell him a lie, because Will would see through it; but though Hannibal has never been good at lying, he has learnt long ago that silence is what protects secrets best.

It was Murasaki who tutored him in the subtleties of this particular science. In her bedroom, which she insisted on keeping separate from Uncle Robert’s so they might meet in the couloir in moonlight and then only—she told Hannibal, *rituals matter,* and Hannibal never forgot—in her bedroom she kept in the deep drawer of the dressing table a jewellery box locked with a real lock.

Murasaki owned many beautiful things that she let Hannibal touch, but the jewellery box was his favourite. He remembers how the drawer squeaked as he tugged at the brass pull; how the box was too heavy to hold comfortably and had to be placed on the bed, distending the rich navy sheets with lines like circles on the water. How the overwhelming smell of metal and

dust made his head pound warm and painful. He would run his fingers over the clasp, over the fine brushes of gold on black lacquer. Time and again, he begged her to show him what was inside, but she'd only say the box held secrets, and secrets were to be locked away.

'Maybe when I'm older?' he'd try.

'Secrets are meant to be kept, Hannibal. Otherwise they're hardly secrets anymore.'

'We can keep them together. Two people can share a secret.'

'If one is deep under the earth, perhaps.'

'I could have killed him.'

Hannibal blinks and listens. Will's voice echoes empty.

'I mean, it's not like I'd remember.'

'You didn't kill him, Will. I am sorry Jack suggested otherwise.'

'No, he was right. I could have killed him. Jack did the right thing.'

There's a thread of yearning in his voice. For a flash, Hannibal sees the old FBI profiler peering out from beneath the crease of his brow: justice on his lips and conviction in his hands.

He reaches out. Will's hands feel the same as always. The spell breaks.

'If you had killed him,' Hannibal says, 'it would not have been you. You are here today. That is all that matters.'

'And who I am tomorrow? Doesn't that matter?'

'Of course.'

'Yeah—that's the problem then, isn't it?'

Hannibal isn't sure what the problem is, exactly, but Will is done talking. His shirt rides up his stomach as he stands and stretches. Hannibal wants to grab him and pull him into his lap, but he can't imagine Will taking it well under the circumstances.

'I'm going to shower,' he announces. Hannibal feels a rush of pride, tinged only with sadness: that Will has recovered a firm enough grasp on emotional self-control to choose suffering in the privacy of a bathroom is a victory, and should be treated as such. 'Are you going to go see Abigail?'

'Not today. Tomorrow morning, perhaps.'

Will shrugs, but relief bleeds through the stitches of his indifference.

'I'll go get started on dinner.'

‘Okay.’

They share an *agnello al forno* from the clay pot Hannibal has finally brought over from Baltimore. Will eats very little, pushing the meat around his plate and emanating grimness. But when Hannibal offers to make him something else, he claims the food is delicious and continues not to eat any.

That night, Hannibal waits for him a long time. He knows Will is awake, tossing and turning on the squeaking bed: the absence is by choice and Hannibal’s right side feels several degrees colder than it should. Zoe gets the idea to climb onto the mattress to keep him company and is rather relentless about it, but he pushes her off every time—if she takes up Will’s place, Will might not come to claim it.

It does give him an idea though.

‘Will,’ he says into the darkness. ‘Can you please do something about your dog?’

The shape of Will shifts. ‘Just tell her no,’ it says.

Hannibal is convinced Zoe is half-deaf—she certainly never reacts when he calls her name unless it is in her express interest—so he doesn’t expect this will make much of a difference. ‘Zoe, no,’ he says softly, just in case she does hear him.

At his next push, Zoe growls. It’s not much of a growl, really, a rumble of irritation more than aggression, but it is all Hannibal needs—Will gets up at once.

Will’s *no* is significantly sterner than Hannibal’s, and Zoe scutters away; but his hands are gentle when he pulls her onto her own bed, where she rolls on her back immediately.

‘You can’t let her growl at you,’ Will tells him as he rubs her belly with practiced motions.

‘Yes, Will.’

‘You just have to distract her. If you’re only pushing at her, she’s going to think you’re playing.’

‘I see.’

‘Will you be good now?’ Will whispers to the dog, but heat pools in Hannibal’s stomach all the same.

He latches onto Will’s wrist before he has the time to stand back up.

Oddly, it feels as though they’ve been arguing. The stiffness in Will’s neck belies a consideration that makes little sense otherwise. Eventually, whatever fight’s been in him leaves in an exhale, and he crumples onto the mattress, snaking his arms around Hannibal’s middle and holding tight.

‘I can’t stop thinking about it,’ he whispers.

‘Thinking about what, Will?’

‘Who killed him.’

There’s genuine fear in the tremble nested under Will’s skin. The sweat on his neck is cold and crusted. Hannibal tucks his head into the crook of his chin and breathes it in, thinking about how to reframe the conversation.

‘Are you familiar with the story of Little Red Riding Hood?’

Will’s amusement isn’t vocalized, but it rumbles in his chest. ‘Don’t know—it sounds obscure.’

Hannibal plants a kiss on the back of his neck, just under the hairline. ‘A girl goes into a forest and meets a wolf. In some interpretations, the wolf succeeds in eating her—but the hunter slices his stomach open and pulls her out. A Caesarean delivery.’

He can’t see Will’s smile but hears it in the way his body stretches into Hannibal’s touch. ‘Hm. And then what?’

‘Then the wolf must be killed. Usually, it is the hunter who performs the act. He is a protector: that is his role in the story.’

‘Yeah.’

‘But if he weren’t around, Little Red Riding Hood would have been forced to do it herself. She is a little girl when the wolf swallows her, but from the tear in his stomach she is reborn a survivor.’

Will says nothing. The silence eases into Hannibal a new suspicion: he has written both Abigail and Will Graham into the narrative but left out the possibility that he himself might have acted Nick Boyle’s executioner. Is that what Will is fearful of? Or is it the revelation he might most readily accept? After all, a murder would sully Abigail’s innocence and Will’s sense of self; but it is not entirely incongruous with Will’s concept of Hannibal as caretaker. On those grounds, the crime could make more sense to him; perhaps it could even be forgiven.

The very idea of it burns. It would be a lie, but it would be closer to the truth than anything else Hannibal might say on the matter. He cannot expect Will to carry the burden of the sum of his secrets, but what if he could peel back a corner?

He opens his mouth to say Will’s name and draw his attention, but no sound comes out.

‘Do you know what happened after she killed the wolf?’

Hannibal can’t say it, so he presses his head between Will’s shoulder blades and shakes his *no* into his skin.

‘She went home. She told her mother what happened. And her mother said, you did the right thing. The wolf is dead and you’re alive. Then she packed her another basket and told her to

leave and never come back. Because the woods are full of wolves—because now that you've done in one, you won't stop.'

And this is what Hannibal means, he wants to say—to Will, but he can't and so only to himself—this is what he means about Will unfolding like a thread from Hannibal's mind, like a figment of the psyche made corporeal, like a wish that's been wished too much too often. Will tells the story as though he is reading it off a crumpled page or remembering it off a photograph, but the memory is Hannibal's, never shared and never written.

Much like the girl in Will's story, Hannibal too came home to France and his uncle and aunt, and though at first it felt merely like a place to sleep, it grew over with the ivy of passing years, until he was secured inside a new nest just as the time came to leave it.

He was Abigail's age when he told Murasaki about the men he'd killed.

He remembers that she never seemed afraid. He was unskilled in reading others then, and she proficient at hiding, so the truth of her feeling will forever remain a mystery; but she never seemed afraid. And she never let him finish the tale.

He told her about Norkus first. He told her, 'Do you remember a few years ago, when Chiyoh and I went to Vilnius with Uncle Robert?' He said it softly, hanging on the final syllables, like he was readying himself to confess a child's wrongdoing—that he'd never worn his hat like she told him to, or bought a pack of cigarettes and choked on them. A smile teased at her lips in expectation of a tale of mischief, and then Hannibal said, 'I met the man that killed my sister.'

He told her how he killed Norkus. Then he tried to tell her about the hunter who'd found him, who was sure to call the police, who was going to end it all for Hannibal and so—but she held up a hand.

'Let's not talk about this anymore,' she said.

'I might do it again,' Hannibal said, not knowing if he was saying it because it was true or because he wanted to shock her.

'If you do, I don't want to hear about it. Do you understand?'

She did not tell him to leave and never come back, but she ordered him brochures from overseas universities and stopped smiling when he spoke of human anatomy and the wonders of modern medicine. 'You're an artist,' she would say, 'aren't you?' He eventually decided she was correct and left to become one in Florence—finally breathing free outside the dense air that had swelled their home like infection.

'I'm afraid they'll take her away,' Will whispers. 'She can't go to prison.'

'She won't. Jack Crawford has his opinions, but he hasn't a shred of evidence.'

'Are you sure?'

‘Yes.’ Unless Abigail is actively trying to implicate herself. But then that is another thing that tomorrow’s visit will reveal. ‘I won’t allow them to take her away, Will.’

Will gives a jerky nod. His stomach is hot where Hannibal touches—if he worries himself into a fever, Hannibal might not be able to see Abigail tomorrow after all.

‘What else are you afraid of, Will?’

‘I’m afraid—I’m afraid of not knowing who I am.’

Hannibal is afraid that he *does* know who Will is, but that he refuses to see it.

‘You didn’t kill Nick Boyle, Will.’

‘I remember it.’

‘You remember killing him?’

Will grimaces. He looks on the verge of tears—Hannibal cannot tell him a thing or it will break him entirely, it will, and then where is that going to leave Hannibal?

‘I killed—what’s his name. Abigail’s father.’

‘Yes. I told you that.’

Half of a grin. ‘Yeah. I remember it, too. The blood on my skin. His life seeping into the forest floor.’

‘You killed him in the kitchen, Will.’

Will frowns, eyes searching. ‘I don’t remember *that.* I could smell the winter air, wet ground frosting over.’

‘There’s a sharp, coppery smell to winter air. That’s what blood smells like.’

Will isn’t convinced, but he dismisses the incongruity. ‘I remember killing Nick Boyle, too. A knife between the ribs. The crunch and slurp of it as it moves down. The—do you remember the time Jack came to ask me for help? When Beverly was here?’

‘Of course.’

‘He showed me a picture of a man covered with butterflies. Skull open, belly open, just—*open,* torn open.’ Will draws in a sharp breath. ‘I remember killing him, too.’

Hannibal’s arms tighten around him. He wasn’t sure if Jack had brought pictures. That he had, that Will had seen them and found them too upsetting to look at, that he saw in them only a fear of slipping identity and nothing of Hannibal, that he didn’t understand what it was to mean—

But the picture he'd painted onto the floor of that museum was only ever meant for a Will Graham now dead. Strangely, it makes sense that Will would see in it only himself: what is he today if not Hannibal's limb? Liver—gut?

'I know I didn't kill that man in Jack's photo,' Will whispers. 'Or at least I don't think I did. But that's not how I remember it. I saw it and I felt guilty, I felt—I felt like someone else had come in and burned through me until there wasn't anything left.'

Hannibal should reassure him, but he struggles to come up with anything convincing.

Will rubs his eyes. He is exhausted; it's well past the time he usually dips into sleep. 'What are *you* afraid of?' he asks.

He thinks about the tale Will has spun, about all of the stories he's told that he could not have known, about the smooth expanse of his skin in the dark—about the lines writ into him by Hannibal's hand.

'Sometimes I'm afraid that you only want me because I want you,' he says.

Will considers this, his eyes on the ceiling.

'Would that be so bad?' he asks.

It is that and worse, but Hannibal is hardly going to admit such a thing. 'I can imagine worse fates,' he says, which is technically true even if he struggles to conjure any at the moment. 'If you had killed him—and if there were more wolves in the woods waiting for your knife—is that your worst fate?'

Will screws his eyes shut. 'It's late,' he pushes through a tight jaw. 'Let's not talk about this anymore.'

The next morning, Will wakes late but without a fever, and Hannibal goes to see Abigail.

He doesn't call ahead.

She is expecting him.

The thing immediately obvious is that she is tired: the circles under her eyes cave deeper today, her lips are pale and her skin yellowish with sleep deprivation. Hannibal shucks his jacket when he enters the bedroom broiler, chock-full of the strong spring sun that picks up every swirl of dust; but Abigail is wearing a thick cotton sweater with a shawl collar, and even still she is pulling the cuffs around her hands to act as mittens.

'Has Jack Crawford paid a visit?' he asks her.

'Yesterday.' She's careful not to look at him. 'He and Doctor Bloom took me to Quantico. Made me look at the body.'

'He has paid a visit to Wolf Trap as well. He expressed a wish to search the house.'

Abigail folds her arms over her chest. Her right thumb moves incrementally back-and-forth in a soothing motion she is unaware of. ‘He suspects you?’

‘No. He suspects Will.’

That makes her look.

‘Will? But—’

‘Who else did you imagine would fall under suspicion? Who else is the FBI to believe killed Nicholas Boyle—if not you? Or did you not consider that at all when you excavated what little is left of him?’

His voice doesn’t rise at the final accusation, but she winces anyway.

‘They have no evidence,’ she says shakingly. ‘You got rid of the knife. If I don’t say anything, and you don’t say anything, and I *didn’t* say anything, then—at least it’s out there. At least we don’t have to wait for him to be found.’

‘Someone is going to take the fall for this, Abigail. It won’t be me and it won’t be Will. Will it be you?’

She doesn’t answer. This can’t end well, Hannibal realizes. If he cannot trust her, he cannot allow her freedom; but if she has no freedom, she is sure to eventually betray him. For all her placating silence now, for all that she feels threatened by the possibility that she might lose him as an ally, she is no longer fully a child—and Hannibal should have known as much and never taken such a risk.

He could allow himself more risks back then. Though little has changed on the surface, Hannibal feels today as though he is losing purchase—the aspects of life he has once controlled evade him, his intentions murk up and are left forgotten, and the future blinks uncertain on a horizon too distant to see.

But whatever he decides to do, he must *know* for sure—know the extent of Abigail’s transgression, the motivation behind it, the likelihood that he has unwittingly buried two bodies for her and not just the one.

‘Why did you want them to find Nicholas Boyle?’ he asks. ‘Was it a clutch for control?’

Abigail shrugs. ‘It might help me sleep at night.’

‘You have to learn to let go of worry, Abigail. It leads to rashness, and that in turn leads to mistakes.’ He takes care to soften his voice. ‘This was a mistake.’

She seems to steel herself against a tide of some emotion, too big to show him. There’s a moment when he thinks she will agree—but it passes before the satisfaction can register.

‘Maybe it wasn’t a mistake,’ she retorts. ‘Freddie Lounds was here last week.’

Freddie Lounds is the last thing Hannibal needs right now, but he can't help the swell of excitement—it rewards him to find her so interested not only in the habits of the Chesapeake Ripper, but now too in the other lives he leads. 'She was?'

'She doesn't think Nick Boyle actually killed Marissa. She thinks it was someone else.'

She looks him in the eye. It's electrifying.

'I imagine she suspects you,' he says lightly.

'I imagine she suspects Will Graham.'

Hannibal allows it. 'Do you suspect Will Graham?' he asks, though he is fairly sure that is not at all who Abigail suspects.

She hesitates.

'It doesn't matter who I suspect,' she says quickly. 'What matters is, maybe Nick Boyle wasn't a monster. Maybe he was a victim.'

'And that makes him deserving of a proper burial. A deeply entrenched idea in our culture, the earning of our grave through the way we live and die. By allowing the family of Nick Boyle a chance at closure, are you hoping to earn your own grave?'

'Maybe.'

It's a meaningless reply.

Hannibal faces the window. Outside, the blooming trees frame the conservatory where they used to sit. Behind him, he hears Abigail shifting, allowing her body to meld to her discomfort now that he has turned his gaze away.

This isn't working. In the weeks of his absence, she has dug a trench between her intention and his influence. If she continues to shelter herself, he has no chance at understanding her at all.

'Would you like to visit Wolf Trap today?'

She stills, caught in the surprise. Hannibal feels her teeter on the edge of threat and relief.

'Maybe,' she mumbles noncommittally.

Despite himself, Hannibal smiles. 'It's a nice day. We could take a walk.'

Her brows furrow, then snap back to indifference. 'Is Will home?' she asks in monotone.

'He will be very happy to see you.'

He leaves her to get ready and goes to secure permission from the attendant. She hesitates before giving it but doesn't share the reason why. She only requests he be careful with

Abigail—which Hannibal fully intends to be.

‘Aren’t you going to call ahead?’ Abigail asks when she slides into the seat of the Bentley. She’s fiddling with the strap in her bag, an ugly worn thing from another life.

The engine purrs to life, loud with the unpleasant smell of gas and air-conditioning run stale. He checks that all the doors are locked, then turns on the seat heater for her. ‘Let’s make it a surprise.’

‘Won’t that upset him?’

She hasn’t seen Will since the hospital, Hannibal realizes. This will be a surprise for them both.

‘I’m sure seeing you could not upset him.’

He is right. There’s a flicker of panic in Will’s eyes when he opens the door and sees behind it someone who isn’t Hannibal, but he pushes it into a faint tremble in his hands and conjures up a smile, bright and clumsy and painful. Immediately some of the tension between Hannibal and Abigail is dispelled.

The woods are wet with March and downy with new life. Their boots squelch in the mud and slide precariously on the boulders that vein paths in the overflowing streams of melted snow. The dogs have all turned into golems by the time they lose sight of the house. Chip transfers fresh mud onto Abigail’s trousers every time he leaps at her, excited at having a willing playmate, and Casper finds himself a small tree to carry in his jaws, visibly put-out when Hannibal refuses to play catch with it.

Hannibal lets them walk ahead of him, content to observe. They do not talk very much; for all that Will is eager to interrogate Hannibal on any and all news of Abigail, he struggles to ask questions and she struggles to volunteer information. The remarks they exchange focus on the dogs, their temperaments, origin stories and relative levels of cuteness. Sometimes, they venture into commenting on the weather, the pleasures of hiking, and how much mud they can feel sloshing around their shoes. Their laughter is uneasy, held back and often ringing false; but the awkwardness is a strange species of comfort, smoothing ruffled feathers and steadying racing pulses, until Hannibal relaxes enough that he can recognize in it the melodies of lullabies he hasn’t heard in years.

In an unprecedented turn of events, upon their return Will announces he will be fine giving the dogs a bath on his own. Hannibal balks at the idea, imaging already the state of the bathroom that would be left for him to clean were he to allow such a thing. Then again, on previous occasions when he’s been roped into the task, his role was perfunctory at best, passing towels and helping with the lifting of Winston and Betty. Will says it’s warm enough to set out a wash basin on the back porch, so eventually Hannibal helps him bring down a few buckets of water and resigns himself to hoping for the best.

He finds Abigail drying her feet in the sun on the front porch, eyes shut against the light and head propped on the backrest of the bench. The walk has put some colour back in her cheeks.

‘Will you have something to drink?’ he offers.

She asks for coffee. Looking at her, Hannibal can tell it stands little chance of keeping her awake, but he brews a pot anyway.

‘It’s nice here,’ she says as she watches him pour. ‘Reminds me of home. Though I’m not sure that’s a good thing.’

‘It reminds me of one of my homes as well. But I have had others since.’

‘I’m supposed to infer I can have a new home, too.’

He sits on the bench at her side and leans against the cushion. The door to the house is edged open; through the crack come the distant splashes of a disaster in the making.

‘It won’t be the hospital, that’s for sure.’

‘You won’t be at the hospital forever.’

‘I have already.’

Hannibal casts her a chiding glance for the dramatics, but she is staring off into space. ‘Some of the girls are reading *Tattle Crime* these days. They don’t have enough morbidity in their own lives, so they have to borrow mine.’

‘Do they believe you a monster, then?’

‘No.’ She doesn’t smile, but it’s a near thing. ‘I’m only the heroine of their tragedy. And now that Freddie Lounds has written about Nick Boyle, they think that if I did kill him, I only did it because of what happened to me.’

It bothers her and Hannibal can understand why. Determinism can be so simple and so distasteful: Little Red Riding Hood clawing her way out of the wolf’s loins doomed to repeat her sin. Her life now and forever belongs to the wolf and to the memory of choking on his stomach acid. Hannibal doesn’t like tragedies. And he hasn’t the stomach for determinism.

He feels a sudden flare of anger at Will. He is glad he is out of sight.

‘They see you as the victim of your story,’ he says gently. ‘And you are one. Part of healing is accepting the fact, but that is not enough—you must reclaim your power.’

‘That’s what I was doing.’

‘In killing Nick Boyle, perhaps. But trying to bring him back into the world was desperate and foolish.’

She folds over herself at the harsh words, arms folding instinctively over her chest.

‘We all share a yearning to be known, Abigail. We all wish to confess and unburden. But not all stories can be told. You must learn to recognize when that yearning is destructive.’

She nods. For a moment, she is silent. Then,

‘I’ve been stashing pills. I’m surprised they even let me leave with you.’

Hannibal’s shoulders tense. ‘What are you stashing them for?’

‘I don’t know. In case. In case I need them—in case I run. Or if I have to grind them into someone’s drink?’ She snorts. ‘I don’t know. I didn’t have a plan in mind, I just did it.’

Hannibal can certainly understand that.

‘They think I was going to kill myself,’ she adds unnecessarily.

‘Were you?’

Abigail shakes her head. The sun pierces through a fringed cloud and blinds her into closing her eyes, one hand coming up to shield her face. Hannibal can smell a summer fast approaching.

‘I don’t want to die,’ she says. ‘I should, but I don’t.’

Hannibal stays silent, knowing a boundary has been breached. Any space he leaves now, she will soon fill.

‘It would make things easier if I did want to die,’ Abigail elaborates, eyes fixed now on a particularly large mud stain at her ankle. ‘I feel like—maybe that’s horrible, but I feel like I was meant to die. Not just that day in the kitchen, but before that. It was *me* my dad wanted. Every girl was just his way of delaying the inevitable. I cheated my way out again and again because I don’t want to die, but if I am destined to—to *die*—it feels like I’m disrupting the balance of the world or something. I’m an error.’

Hannibal dislikes tragedies and he dislikes determinism, so he says,

‘You are not error, Abigail,’ even though he feels it, too.

‘That’s not what the parents of all those girls would say.’

He feels the weight of the moment a fraction of a second before he realizes what’s coming. Careful, he thinks. The keen pleasure of unwrapping her truth is almost enough to knock him off-course if he isn’t careful.

‘What would they say?’ he prompts gently.

Abigail’s hands fist in her lap. ‘That I killed them,’ she says. ‘And I did.’

Then, she starts crying. Hannibal’s chest swells with victory.

‘Your father killed those girls, Abigail. Not you.’

‘I helped him—I helped him find them, choose them, *bait* them. They came to me, and then I let him take them.’

He slides closer, wraps his right arm around her shoulders, then tugs her into an embrace. Even through his shirt, her breath is wet and hot on his chest; one of her hands comes to clutch at the inner lining of his jacket, balling it into a wrinkled mass that Hannibal can feel mirrored inside his ribcage.

‘You did what you had to do to survive,’ he says, thinking about what *he* might have to do to her, just to ensure the same for himself. ‘No one could fault you that.’

‘Yes, they could.’

He smiles into her hair. ‘Some could. But I don’t.’

Her sobs quieten gradually into whimpers and sniffles. Hannibal lays a hand on her head and strokes through, untangling the hanks that the wind and the walk have knotted.

‘Maybe they’re right,’ she whispers, so low he has to angle his head to catch it. ‘Maybe I am a monster. Maybe I’m bound to do it again.’

‘You are not a monster,’ he says. ‘And if you do it again, you’ll come to me. Yes?’

Her exhale is shaky, but she nods into his shoulder. He feels her body slacken as her secrets seep into the fabric of his shirt.

Hannibal has only listened—he hasn’t told any secrets of his own. Yet, strangely, he feels as though his own burden is lessened.

‘You won’t—you won’t tell Will?’

Hannibal is *certainly* not telling Will.

‘It’s our secret, yours and mine,’ he assures. ‘But there is something else I must ask. If you *have* killed anyone else, Abigail—I would like you to tell me now.’

She stiffens. When she pulls away from him, he finds her face hot and red, the outline of his shirt seams printed onto one cheek.

‘I told you everything—what do you mean?’

He examines her face for any signs of deception and finds none. That is hardly proof enough, but after their conversation, after holding her, there’s an understanding between their bodies, he thinks, and if she were the intruder, Hannibal is sure he would feel it.

‘A man I know was murdered,’ he says. ‘I received a text message from an anonymous number informing me of the event. I found the body and I buried it—if I had not, I would have fallen under suspicion, and so would Will.’

Uncomfortably, he feels as though he isn't telling her the truth. That wasn't why he disposed of the body, was it? His motives are buried under weeks of memory, and if he is lying, he cannot remember what it is he's lying about.

'Who—who's the man that was killed?'

'You don't know him. Perhaps it's better you don't know the name—but I will tell you if you wish.'

She dithers, then shakes her head. 'I didn't—I didn't do that.'

'I had to be sure. Whoever it is, they have intimate knowledge of my life and Will's. We need to be careful about how we proceed, Abigail. If they are so enmeshed, they could be close to all of us—they could be close enough that they might even become a suspect in the murder of Nick Boyle if we make our luck. Do you understand?'

She nods, wide-eyed.

'That will require careful handling. I would prefer it if you didn't talk to Freddie Lounds until I have some idea who this individual might be.'

It's such an easy ploy, yet works so well: an emotional upheaval, the promise of salvation, an offering of trust and, finally, a suggestion that she is responsible now for protecting them all. Abigail's face is writ with resolve.

'Okay,' she says. 'I'll be careful.'

From inside the house erupts Chip, trailing a towel and threads of water that glitter red and golden in the sun.

Hannibal intercepts him before he can fling himself down the stairs and into the mud.

'Oh, good, you got him.' Will's clothes are stained with dark patches of wet. A drop of water hangs just off the tip of his nose. 'I'm nearly done anyway—'

He sees Abigail's red eyes then. He clears his throat.

'Do you need anything?' He can't make himself look at Abigail, so it ends up sounding as though he is addressing Hannibal.

'Thank you, Will. We'll go get started on lunch in a minute.'

Will gives a jerky nod. He dallies for a few seconds, wanting but uncertain of his welcome, then disappears into the house.

Hannibal sits Chip on his lap and towels him off. Then, he does as promised and goes to fix lunch.

Abigail follows him into the kitchen. She hovers in a show of helpfulness, but it's very clear she'd rather be sitting down. Hannibal wonders how much she's slept.

‘There’s not much to be done. Would you go check on the dogs for me?’

It’s an obvious out that she exchanges for a smile, then scutters away.

Hannibal chops. The knife lies oddly in the crook of his hand.

The longer he’s in the kitchen alone, the colder the knowing of it becomes: knowing what she’s done, why she’s done it, knowing he should never have told her as much as he did. Knowing she is a liability he cannot afford. She turns her face into his chest and offers help in the kitchen because she is alone and because she knows there are wolves in the woods with teeth sharper than hers—but everyday her teeth are growing, and Hannibal can feel already the crunch of her baby milks under his feet.

And now she knows of the intruder. It’s a relief *she* isn’t the intruder, but she might well be more dangerous in either case: for all that the intruder knows about Hannibal, he hasn’t seen him here in this house, he hasn’t walked the floors of Wolf Trap, he hasn’t breathed in the sharp air. Abigail has. He has brought her here. If she is a risk to him, it is entirely Hannibal’s own fault.

He cannot allow it. Not when the FBI are getting curious. Not when he has to manage living around Will. Not when he has buried a body for someone and doesn’t know who.

It will break Will.

Will is already broken.

Hannibal puts the knife away and pulls open the cabinet door. They keep some of Will’s meds here, the ones he takes with meals and those he needs access to in an emergency. The mortar sits on the edge of the counter. She’s already so tired, it wouldn’t take more than a pinch mixed into her eggs. Will would assume she’s worn out from the walk. When she started feeling faint, he’d tell her to lie down on the bed, and he’d shush the dogs as she slept.

Hannibal would wait for Will to go to the bathroom upstairs. He would remove his shoes. He would pierce her skin with a needle. Too much of anything will have the desired effect, and they have plenty of anything left.

From then on, the story weaves itself: a traumatized girl murders a man in a bout of hysteria. When found out, she attempts to kill herself. After her stash of pills is intercepted by the hospital staff, she spots her opportunity in a moment of distraction and helps herself to the medicine cabinet of a sick man—what a tragedy for all involved.

The house is so very quiet. Hannibal leaves the eggs to set and traverses it, mindless, arms and neck prickling numb. He’s not so sure they’ve closed the door behind them properly: he thinks Abigail did it, and she wouldn’t have known to shove at it for the lock to catch. Distantly, he becomes aware his pulse has quickened.

The door hangs ajar. Hannibal closes it. Betty gives a huff. The dogs are stretched on the floor, tired from their adventures. Abigail isn’t among them.

He finds her in the study, melted into an armchair. The blanket covering her obstructs view of her chest—if it is rising, Hannibal cannot tell. She looks as though he had done it already. She looks as though someone else had got in early and done it for him.

Hannibal doesn't like determinism, but this isn't that. This is else. This is the knowing that comes seconds before the drop. There are those meant to live and those meant to die: Hannibal knows this because he has seen it, held it, fought it. Because he lived and Mischa died, and because he cannot imagine at all what his life might be like if she had not. She was made to die. That is what he must believe.

If he doesn't kill Abigail today, he will kill her tomorrow. If he doesn't do that, someone else will take her the day after—it is the same cold knowing, the certainty that they are each destined for a thing and that there are destinies inescapable. They are both of them destined to keep their secrets: but Hannibal is destined to live his, and Abigail to die crowned with hers.

The pipes hum as the shower comes on upstairs. He could do it now.

What if Will comes down early and catches him in the act? Hannibal would need to kill him too, there would be no escaping it. Will would flail and bite, but Hannibal would do just fine shoving him onto the bed, pillow over the face to muffle screams—the dogs might get agitated if he screams, but they are used to Will kicking his legs and cutting off moans.

Alana would know. No—she might not know, but she would suspect—he would need to kill her, too, and then he would need to run again: a new country, a new sky, a place where no one knows him.

For a few moments, he lives it. He breathes in the smell of blood, of altitude, of sea salt. The future tastes bright and promising, there to reach out and take for his own.

And then, the light of it goes off.

Hannibal doesn't like determinism.

Yes, she may be destined to die—and yes, Hannibal might be destined to live trapped in a cage of his own making—but Will had been destined to die, too, and he is more alive every day. Through this persistence, he has tucked them into a pocket of time where destiny's hands cannot reach; they lie nestled now in the shadows of all the timelines they laugh at.

He goes back to the kitchen. His hands aren't shaking, but it's a near thing.

The eggs are done. He covers them with a plate, so they keep warm and grow softer for when Abigail wakes and when Will gets out of his shower.

Hannibal starts on the salad.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Next time, a happenstance meeting proves revelatory. Then, a storm.

The Storm

Chapter Summary

With a change in weather, things of the past return: a patient, a fever, and an old fear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fourteen: The Storm.

They eat on the porch. Sun glimmers on three sets of cutlery, hurting their eyes. With every bite, every sip, there's an increased tempo in Hannibal's chest, in his head and neck, a nervous energy that will singe until it is spent: half-pain, half-anxiety, half-something else. He needs another walk. He needs to take Will to bed. His mouth curls against his will; once, he has to bite the inside of his cheek to stop it from stretching into a grin.

After lunch, Will draws him into the house.

'You asked her where she goes?' he whispers.

Hannibal's back is to the wall that separates them from Abigail, ensconced on the porch in a new blanket Will's pulled from the dryer. She is still nursing her orange juice. Hannibal squeezed it himself: a taste of summer, somewhere far away. It will have made her think of Florida shores, where she's vacationed once with her father. It makes Hannibal think of Italian vineyards frying in the high sun.

'Hannibal—when she leaves the ward?'

He's surprised Will has retained that information through the haze of Jack Crawford-induced panic. Then again, Will turns night guard the moment the sun sets.

'I have not,' he admits.

Will looks at Hannibal as though he does not understand the point of him.

'Well—*will* you ask her?'

Hannibal hasn't been planning on it, though he certainly doesn't mind. He also doesn't mind Will crowding him in against the wall, which is why he decides to stall.

'I don't see why I should.' He is immediately rewarded when Will's face twists in anger. 'Surely she is entitled to her adventures.'

‘Adventures—fuck adventures. It’s not like she’s going out clubbing, Hannibal.’

‘She might be.’

Hannibal wonders if Will would push him. He doesn’t think so: Will might not care about the various indignities of Hannibal’s daily life, but to escalate an argument into the physical would constitute a step over his lines. But encephalitis impacts emotional control, doesn’t it? Surely if Hannibal tried hard enough—

‘What are you so goddamn happy about?’

Hannibal realizes a fraction too late he is smiling. Will catches his eye. His lips quirk up.

‘I’m not smiling back,’ Will advises. ‘I can’t stand you when you’re like this.’

‘I apologize.’

‘Hm.’ Will’s hand is on his chest now, playing with a button. Hannibal smiles wider. ‘If she was going clubbing, the nurses at the ward would’ve told Jack Crawford that much. I’m fairly sure they know what a teenage hangover looks like. Just find out where she’s going. Or —find her a place to go. Right?’

‘Yes, Will.’

He keeps the keys to his Baltimore house in the desk drawer, on top the calendar. He’s taken back at the unfamiliar weight of them in his hand. It’s perhaps another risk, but he’ll go over with her that first time and double-check that the basement is shut tight. She is too clever to go looking for trouble—or at least to speak up should she find it.

Though she is appropriately uneasy when he makes the offer, it barely masks the eagerness underneath. He cannot fault her the poor performance. The house has stood empty long enough; if she’s after a refuge, it’s the obvious choice.

‘The fridge is empty,’ he warns. ‘When I’m driving you back into Baltimore, we’ll have to stop by with groceries.’

‘That’s okay, I’ll manage—’

‘You take me for such a poor host?’

She doesn’t care about the food, of course. She cares about the keys in her hand, about the promise of quiet nights and escape from scrutiny, about the independence that comes from knowing there’s a somewhere else she can go. She could not care less about the food. There is much she’s been deprived of, but she does not know true need, not the kind that rots through the stomach until organ after organ shrivels and turns into void—how odd it strikes him sometimes that many have never known it.

‘When are we going?’ she asks.

‘Whenever you like.’

She knows she shouldn't ask, not with Will right there in the doorway, but her eagerness is impossible to temper. 'Can we go now?'

Hannibal packs her the leftovers from lunch—she'll likely want to sample her freedom as soon as possible, and he doesn't know whether she can be trusted to cook for herself. Will watches him do it, fumbling awkwardly with the phone in his hand where Abigail has entered her number. He is supposed to send her the pictures he took of her with the dogs, though it'll have to wait until Hannibal can spare a moment to figure out how to do this. Will's phone is a strange beast.

'Should we—give her money?' he mumbles. 'I don't know. Is that—is that okay, or—? If she's wandering about at night, then she needs money for a cab. But she might not take it. I don't know. I don't want it to be awkward.'

'I could leave some money at the house,' Hannibal offers. 'With a note?'

'Yeah. That's good.'

He's quiet for a moment. The fridge hums something horrible. Hannibal would like a bigger one, but he thinks he might miss this one's rancour.

'Don't just buy her your food,' Will pipes up again. 'Get her ice-cream or something. Chips, popcorn, I don't know—she's not going to make goddamn boeuf bourguignon if she comes round in the middle of the night.'

'I don't expect her to make herself boeuf bourguignon.'

'But you're not buying chips and popcorn.'

'I think I have corn kernels at home.'

Will runs an exasperated hand through his hair. 'I don't trust you with this.'

'You are more than welcome to come with us.'

It is testament to his lack of trust that Will seems to genuinely consider it. Then, he sags.

'I'm fine here,' he says, unconvincing.

On his way out, a need grips Hannibal, urgent and brash, and he chances a kiss—just a small thing, a brush of lips against Will's forehead, there and gone.

He keeps walking, not daring to look back in case he might catch his reaction. His heart thunders in his chest. He feels the sort of drunk he'd get on Aperol as a young man, back in heat-drenched Italy, sunny and simple and never quite satisfied.

The Whole Foods they stop at is too bright and smells of nuts and fresh bread. Expecting to be interrogated on his performance, Hannibal sends Abigail to peruse the aisles and select whatever pleases her while he gets the essentials: eggs, bread, vegetables. He considers meat,

but he knows she won't prepare it. He gets smoked salmon instead and more nuts than she can eat.

He finds her in the chocolate aisle, the basket set protectively to the front of her body. The man she's talking to is an acceptable distance away, but there's an uneasiness to the set of his shoulders that translates into the way he is perceived—it's a subconscious thing, Hannibal has noticed, the way that prey will recognize a predator.

There is no reason at all for Randall Tier to be here. There's no reason why he wouldn't be—they've driven in the direction of Washington and Hannibal supposes Randall is allowed to get his shopping from whatever establishment he prefers. But he isn't a part of Hannibal's world anymore, he has been expunged—he has no right to touch it.

'Randall,' he greets. Abigail spares him a curious glance: unaware of their acquaintance, then. 'Quite the pleasant surprise.'

There's a flicker of tension when their eyes meet briefly before Randall retreats into himself; but there's no real surprise. Realization bleeds into Hannibal's skin, tightening muscle. Randall knows where he lives or knows at least that he's no longer in Baltimore. Randall knows who Abigail is, and he knows of their relationship.

How does he know?

He is struck with that paranoid feeling once more, an echo of an old itch: eyes on him, a presence, a shadow. He doesn't believe in a sixth sense, he is not superstitious, but he has stalked enough lambs to know that something in them, ancient and shrivelled—that something in them can always tell when a monster is nearby.

'Doctor Lecter.' Randall's voice is soft: the deception of it stokes fire in Hannibal's lungs. 'How are you doing?'

'I've been well, thank you.'

For a moment, there is silence. In the distance, check-out machines beep and drone their rehearsed lines. Abigail shifts the weight of her basket from one hip to the other.

'How do you know Hannibal?' she asks.

'I was—uh, I'm an old patient.' He looks away like he's embarrassed, showing his neck. It's a clever manoeuvre, again banking on the instinctive: Abigail's shoulders relax slightly and her body inches forward. 'Yeah. I had a pretty rough time of it back then. So, like, I get it, you know.'

'Randall recognized me from the papers,' Abigail explains, which is a good explanation although Hannibal doubts that it's quite true. 'It is Randall, right?'

'Right, yes. I'm sorry, I didn't think to introduce myself.' Randall flashes half a smile. 'I just saw her and thought, I've got to say something, you know? Because I get what it's like to be told there's something wrong with you. I mean, there really was something wrong with me,

but it's not—it's not theirs to feast on, right? And that's what it feels like they're doing, tucking in. My family and my doctors, they were the same.'

He looks at Hannibal then. His eyes are dark.

'Only Doctor Lecter understood how to help me.'

If there is anything Abigail knows, it is how to handle a man like him. 'Hannibal is a good psychiatrist,' she says, tone a perfect impression of bright and ignorant. 'I'm glad he was able to help you.'

'I was glad to help,' Hannibal echoes. 'Abigail, do you need anything from the cosmetics?'

'Yes.'

She understands it's her queue to leave but lingers, gaze trailing the lines of tension between them.

'Can you come help me?' she asks.

She doesn't need help, that much is obvious to all three of them. But if the threat she has identified is enough to inspire this desperate gambit, then Hannibal imagines it is best to heed her survival instincts.

'Of course,' he says smoothly. 'Excuse us—Randall, it was a pleasure.'

Randall gives Abigail a wave goodbye. Hannibal isn't sure if the feeling in his stomach is revulsion or anger.

They burn through the rest of the list. They rush through check-out. Hannibal scans the car park but sees only self-absorbed families. Still, neither of them speaks until the car doors click shut.

'Is that him?' Abigail asks. 'The man who killed your friend?'

'I don't know,' Hannibal says truthfully. 'I will find out. Watch the rear-view for me, please?'

They are not followed. Hannibal cannot shake the thought that this is only because Randall doesn't need to follow. Not anymore.

Could he really have been so distracted? No, not distracted—enamoured with a fantasy that blinkered him to the net tightening on a trap. The claws closing in on him were never the Other Will's claws, they were Randall's, dirt and blood under the crescents, a laugh in his throat—overjoyed to have fooled him, to have bested him, to have led him into stupidity.

He leaves Abigail to unpack the groceries and goes down to the basement. The door isn't locked—more stupidity. These easy risks cannot be taken anymore. He needs to see clearly and he needs to act fast.

Oh, but the bear tooth—he's still got that in the pocket of his jacket, the warmth sickly now. A contagion of stupidity and here in his palm lies the root: sharp point, smooth edge, yellowed with life. The smell of leather drifts off the string, so familiar from being held. Right away he should have known: Randall recognized it, didn't he? He didn't want to let go. He's always been possessive, and he's always wanted to be possessed—what mad things abandonment will do to a man.

But if the bear talisman belongs to Randall, then he must have been the one to leave it on Will's porch. He must have been to the house, before all this, before Will's first death—he must have seen them together, he must have recognized them back then at the Smithsonian and come to see for himself Hannibal's newest fascination. He would have been jealous. He would have seen Will stumble around the house, tend to his dogs, drink himself to a restless sleep, and he would have anticipated that which he would have thought inevitable: a clear cut, an amputation, an uprooting. Randall knows Hannibal does not react well to threats. Randall knows because he himself got too close and was turned away, the threat of consequence for incompliance ringing clear in the final silences they shared. Randall would have expected this same thing for Will. Maybe he felt a kinship with him. Maybe he left the talisman behind not to mock Hannibal, but to serve a token of friendship: protection, he'd told him.

What must he feel for Will now, knowing he's been spared?

Your pet braincase. Hannibal's hands tighten into fists. *Is this a threat, Will?* he's written to Randall. He's given him that, he's shown him—this cannot be allowed. There are things Hannibal cannot allow.

'Can I stay here for now? I'll go back to the ward before they send out a search party.'

She's a dark shape in the light dripping from the top of the stairs. She doesn't ask what he's doing down here: clever girl.

'Yes.' He clears his throat. 'I'd like you to stay until I call. We will think of something to tell the nurse.'

'Do you think he—'

'I will find out,' he repeats, climbing up the stairs to join her. When he's close enough to see her face clearly, he realizes she doesn't look afraid. 'Right now, I'd prefer to take every precaution. He'll have an easier time getting an address for the facility than finding you here.'

It is not much, but it will have to be enough. He cannot waste time moving her again—and in any case, if Randall truly is the intruder, then what he wants most of all is Hannibal's attention. Now that he's baited him, he'll be waiting for a reaction.

By first order of business, he gets a burner phone at a gas station north of Baltimore. It feels sticky in his hands even though he knows it's fresh out of packaging. Randall would have used one just like it to text him. To make him think—

It takes only a few choice lies and a heavy layer of charm to get Randall's home address from a well-meaning manager at the Smithsonian.

The drive is long enough for Hannibal's fury to set and crust over. Now, he feels only tired. He wants to go home and forget. He wants to pretend he has never wanted for anything other than what he has, that he has never believed, that he has not been made a fool.

The day is slipping around him. A fleck of snow falls onto the windshield and melts. On the radio, two hosts are arguing over whether a snow storm in March is a normal occurrence or if it's global warming. The screen of his phone flashes with a text alert: be careful tonight, it says, without much in the way of specifics. One of the hosts is saying nine p.m. Get home before dinner, the other one says. You don't want to get trapped alone in the cold.

The light is on in Randall's apartment. A woman lets Hannibal past the front door, her armful of chihuahua yipping at him in warning. It's wearing a fetching little outfit, a yellow impermeable with a pointless but fitting hood. Hannibal wants to ask her where she's got it, thinking it would suit Zoe, but he doesn't want her remembering him.

He climbs to the third floor. He rings the doorbell.

Randall looks startled to see him, in that way people are when they've been expecting someone else.

'Randall,' Hannibal says. 'Could we speak inside?'

He should refuse to let him in. It's the smart thing. But Hannibal knows the intruder—he is brash and bold and stupid. And Hannibal knows Randall—a young man desperate to feel the warmth of another's regard.

He lets him in.

The apartment is snug, dark, stale. The lights are low-voltage bulbs that would make anyone look ill. An empty pizza box sits on the table; Randall snags and carries it off into the kitchen when he sees him look.

Hannibal is always eager to see a kitchen. This one is a sorry thing, less for eating and more for skulking. Randall's impassioned projects litter the table and counters. Hannibal sees sketches and he sees pages torn from anatomy books; he sees bone and teeth and cartilage. They look animal, though he cannot be sure.

'What are you working on, Randall?' he asks conversationally.

'A—uh—mask, sort of.'

'For yourself?'

'Yeah.'

An elongated jaw lies on a platter painted in rustic daisies. Hannibal picks it up and examines it in the light of the LED panel above the cooker. It is like the jaw of the Smithsonian

skeletons, the dead beasts that came to life in Will's mind. Randall takes a more active approach to his art than Will did to his: the transubstantiation happens with nails and glue, in his long-fingered hands that press and mould and tighten.

What irony, that Hannibal might have found it fascinating in another life. If Randall had made no false promises, if he had not attempted to delude and confuse, if he had come out and admitted his identity the moment it was questioned, Hannibal might have arrived here to kill him but let himself be charmed instead. The apartment, under its dust and mildew, breathes of potential, of a thing that lives in Randall's head but is now taking shape in the world outside of it, in a world Hannibal can touch—this jaw might one day lie against Randall's cheek, might become Randall's jaw.

But Hannibal has been fooled into wishing for more. The intruder he sought had no need for nail or glue: he was imagination incarnate, he was the surreal made corporeal, he could breathe life into thought and thought into life. He wasn't real; as such, anything real Hannibal finds can only disappoint.

'I am curious to know why you've been following me,' Hannibal says, still examining the jaw. It's a pretty thing, graceful in every arch and divot. 'I am curious why you thought it was appropriate to approach Abigail, and why you killed Donald Sutcliffe.'

Randall's laugh is punched out of him, horrible and off-key.

'If you were trying to get my attention—' Hannibal angles his head to catch his eye '—you have it. I am listening.'

Randall is grinning like a hyena, like a wolf choking on his prey's bone. Hannibal tries to fight off the wave of impatience.

'Your attention,' he repeats, a trace of mockery. 'You're listening. Do you really think I want you *listening*?'

'You sent me taunting text messages. You mauled a man to death and left him for me to find. You were clearly seeking attention.'

'I'm not your toy anymore, Doctor Lecter.'

'I admit you are not. Though I struggle to understand why you carry on as though we have a relationship when our friendship ended several years ago.'

This time when Randall bares his teeth, it's not a smile. 'You were not my friend. You pulled me out from the gutter, you showed me how I needed to change to please you, and then when I did, you threw me *back in.*'

Hannibal considers him. 'Is it revenge you seek then?' he asks. 'If it is, you're certainly going about it an odd way.'

Randall presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, head shaking in what appears an amused sort of bewilderment. 'You've got it so wrong,' he whispers. 'I can't believe—I thought so

highly of you. You know? Before.'

'I know.'

'But I'm not your toy,' he repeats, eyes now on Hannibal's. 'And you're so wrong. About all of it. About everything. You'll see. Eventually, I'll make sure you see it.'

Hannibal is fast growing tired of this conversation. 'See what, Randall?'

'That everything you think is yours isn't.' He is grinning again. 'That the things you think are yours aren't yours. They're *mine.*'

At this, Hannibal's scabbed wound bursts open. The anger within will no longer be contained.

'They are not,' he says, drawing himself taller so he may better loom over Randall like a haunting.

'Are too,' Randall insists, voice just a shade weaker. 'Like Will Graham.'

Hannibal takes a step forward. 'That,' he says, 'is not a threat you want to be making, Randall.'

He will drive the bear tusk through his eye while he breathes still, then leave it to rot in his brain.

Randall shrinks into the counter, the pieces of bone behind him clattering. The limelight is off and he sees now his sense of power was illusory at best. Good. Hannibal has given him too much already, he has given him a name he should never have known—

Hannibal's phone rings.

If it's Will, Hannibal swears to God—

The name on the screen is like a worn joke, so familiar it starts chafing.

'Excuse me,' he says to Randall; then, into the receiver, 'Will.'

'Where are you?' Will demands.

'I just dropped by the—'

'Never mind, I don't want to know.' Is his breathing laboured? There's something about his voice Hannibal can't put a finger on. 'I—a storm's coming.'

'I know, Will. I'll get back before it starts snowing in earnest.'

'No, you don't get it—he's going to come. That's when he comes.'

He knows that voice. It's been a while since he heard it last: he must have pushed it into a dark drawer at the back of the room of forget, the room for the things he doesn't touch. He's

not been paying attention, blinkered again, though this time not by Randall but by happiness, simple and potent, and he's let down his guard like a fool.

'Will,' he says. 'Will, are you feeling warm? Do you feel like you might have a fever?'

'—what?'

'A fever. Touch your forehead for me. Does it feel warm?'

'He's coming,' Will repeats. 'I know he's going to come tonight, he always comes when it storms—'

'Are you feeling your forehead, Will?'

'Uh—yeah. 'S warm. Cold. I don't know. Hannibal, where's the gun? I need the gun.'

Dread twists in Hannibal's stomach and knots until he is sure he can never untangle it. 'You don't need the gun, Will. I'm on my way now—will you get the dogs inside and sit with them?'

He *is* on his way: he isn't sure when he turned his back on Randall, thoughtless in his fear, when he retraced his steps through the apartment and thudded the door closed—did he?—but he is now on the stairs already, keys to the Bentley clutched in his hand.

'Okay. Okay, but—is Abigail with you? Is she at your house? You have to close all the windows.'

'I'm bringing her with me,' Hannibal decides. He cannot risk her in the empty house now, not after Randall's proclamations. 'I will have to hang up to call her, but then I'll call you right back and we'll talk some more. Alright, Will?'

'Yeah, alright. But you're—you're coming straight home? No stops?'

'No stops,' Hannibal vows. 'While I'm talking to Abigail, would you take some Advil for me? It's in the kitchen cabinet. Do you remember what it looks like?'

'It's blue-red,' Will supplies. 'And I can read.'

'I know,' Hannibal placates quickly. 'I know, Will.'

'Okay,' Will takes a shaky breath, then another, like he's bracing himself for a leap into deep water. 'Okay, bye.'

The call disconnects.

Hannibal gets into the car, plugs the phone in and orders Abigail a taxi.

'A car will be there for you in ten minutes,' he says quickly when she picks up. The way she mumbled her *hello* made it clear she'd just swallowed something dense and chalky—pizza,

he guesses, imagining what it might be like to feel annoyed about that. ‘The driver will have the address—I need you back in Wolf Trap tonight.’

‘Okay,’ she only says, quick to catch up. ‘Ten minutes.’

‘Ten minutes.’

‘They’re saying there’s going to be a storm.’

‘It won’t start properly until nine,’ he says, though of course he doesn’t really know. ‘We have plenty of time.’

He doesn’t know that either.

He calls Will. The signal is strong still despite the growing wind and darkening sky, but it rings and rings until the answering machine picks up and the connection crumples. He tries again, and once more. He might not hear. He might have forgotten Hannibal’s promise to call him back, or not registered it at all, and is simply ignoring the ringing the way he is wont to when he’s in a mood. Or maybe he can hear things more urgent than an insistent phone.

It might be nothing more than an infection. Although of course there’s no such thing as *just* an infection. The first fevers of Will Graham’s illness must have felt like a simple cold, too.

But it *might* be nothing more. Hannibal might have brought something in from the supermarket or picked it up from a patient. Will’s immunity system is suppressed no longer but still weakened, and that is likely the reason for all this. They’ll go to the ER first thing, as soon as the roads clear, and Hannibal will refuse to leave until they’ve been issued antivirals and steroids and something to help him breathe—his throat will be spasming around each cough, his kidneys will strain against the influx of toxins. If it’s an infection, Hannibal is the root. The bear talisman sits in his pocket: he’s been carrying it around, spreading Randall’s poison through the house, feeding it to the dogs, smearing it over Will’s lips.

The snow is falling heavily now, swirling in the wind that throws the car madly from side to side. He’s maybe a quarter of an hour away if he drives fast, but it’s impossible when he can barely see the road ahead.

It might be a relapse.

It was snowing when Mischa died.

The snow reaches his ankles when he gets out of the car, the gust knocking ice into his face until he feels cut.

The journey from Baltimore will take longer, and the storm is only picking up. It is still safer than having Abigail sit and wait; if the driver decides it is too dangerous to continue, she’ll be better off sequestered at a gas station.

He sees Will before he opens the door, through the thin glass of the window that trembles and whines with every blow. He stands like a wraith, pale and ill, eyes fixed on the horizon he cannot see.

Before he wrenches the door open against the incoming tide of air, before he stumbles inside and starts shushing the dogs, before he touches him—Hannibal digs the bear tooth out his pocket with fingers stiff from the cold, and dumps it into the snow.

Will's neck is hot under his palm. He barely reacts to the touch: doesn't wince, doesn't yank his head away, doesn't complain about the cold of Hannibal's hand.

'Will,' he murmurs. 'Will, did you take the Advil?'

'Huh?'

'Advil.'

'What about it?'

'Would you take it for me now?'

Will shrugs. Hannibal sits him on the bed and goes to retrieve the bottle, sitting in the kitchen cabinet untouched.

Will swallows obediently. He drinks the water like a man parched. His hair is sweated through; Hannibal's hand comes away wet and oily when he rubs at his scalp.

'Did you see him?' he asks.

'Did I see who, Will?'

Will opens his mouth, closes it. He shakes off some thought. Tenses.

When he says it, it's like he's repeating an old mantra he's forgotten the meaning of.

'The Other Will,' he says.

Hannibal's stomach seizes up; he wants to grab at his jaw and force it shut.

'There is no Other Will,' he keeps his tone level. 'It's just you and me.'

Will laughs. It's an ugly sound, nails on sandpaper.

'It's not,' he says.

'Will—'

'I've told you before. You have to listen to what I'm saying to you.'

'Enough!'

It is not quite a yell, but Will recoils anyway, struck by the way Hannibal's anger must appear a larger thing in the dark. The wind whistles its accompaniment to the repetitive thuds and creaks of a house struggling. It is as though they sit in a glass ball in the storm's clawed hand, and the fingers wrapped around them are tightening to crush.

Will puts his head between his knees. His breathing sounds worse than the wind.

Hannibal kneels before him and starts murmuring apologies into every gap between Will's limbs, finding them again as they shift and disappear with the crawling cower, with the pure terror that runs through Will—it is almost enough to make Hannibal believe someone *is* coming, that the monster *is* real. But he's fallen for it once before. He cannot allow it again. He cannot even *hear* the name.

'Will,' he pleads. 'Why don't we get you under the duvet? You can at least stay warm as we wait for Abigail to get here.'

'A—Abigail?'

'Yes. She's coming here to stay the night.'

'Where—where is she going to s—sleep?'

'The mattress, I suppose. I could move it to one of the empty bedrooms upstairs.'

Will's head peeks out from between the folded arms. 'She can't just sleep on the *floor*.'

Hannibal swallows the retort.

'Where else would you have her sleep?'

Will considers this. There's blood on his lips; he must have bitten in too hard.

'Come under the duvet,' Hannibal says. 'You can think more once you're warm.'

Will shakes off his hand when he attempts to help, but he climbs onto the bed and leans against the headboard as Hannibal arranges the blankets on top him.

'Okay.' A shiver wrecks through him. 'But you have to put a blanket under the mattress. Floor's cold.'

'Of course.'

'Where's the space heater?'

Hannibal feels at his forehead again. He's not sure if it's cooling or if that's only him wishing it so.

'I'll get the space heater.'

'And you have to hoover. There's dust.'

'Alright, Will.'

'Don't touch me.'

'Are you angry with me?'

‘Yeah.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know.’ A dry chuckle, turned into a cough. ‘I feel like shit.’

Hannibal does too, but he smiles. ‘I can see that.’

Yellow lights pierce the whirls of ice outside. Buster barks. Will gives a shush, but it’s too weak to be heard.

Hannibal throws the coat back over himself. He has to push at the door with his shoulder to force it open.

The driver refuses to step out of the car. Hannibal can’t blame him, but it means he must put his head halfway into the vehicle if he wants to hear a thing.

‘I’m getting the hell out of here,’ the driver says, or at least that’s what his lips suggest. ‘You’re lucky I got a friend in D.C.’

When he palms through the bills Hannibal gives him, he brightens a little, and even offers Abigail a smile in the rear-view mirror. She pretends not to notice.

It’s useless to try and talk before they get inside, and even then there isn’t much that can be said with a fever-struck Will in earshot. Hannibal leaves Abigail standing watch and goes upstairs to prepare the room for her. The lonely mattress looks odd in the middle of the empty space. He rescues a night-table from the miscellanea of the master bedroom, wipes it clean and sets it by the space heater, so that she may at least have somewhere to put her phone.

He’s suddenly very tired. He sits on the edge of the newly dressed mattress and puts his hands out to warm them in the heater’s heady glow, feeling all at once small and arthritic. This is going to be a long night, he knows: it feels even longer now that it stretches before him in all its possibility, the tendrils of the futures faint and loose as he tries to pull them near. He wishes he could wake up in the morning and have it all be past.

He closes his eyes. When he does, the world goes too black—like he’s fallen headfirst into a well. He used to wonder about what that might be like when he was a little boy, tantalized by the children in books getting trapped at the bottom for days before anyone ever found them. He’d imagine what it might be like to never be found. He made himself cry with the terror of it once, with tears downy and delicious.

He opens his eyes. The lights have gone off.

He finds Abigail at the fuse box fumbling with her phone, torch blasting ugly white light. Hannibal isn’t an electrician, but he can quickly see her attempts will be futile.

‘I think it’s a powerline or something,’ she says. ‘I don’t know, they all look like they’re working. Do you know if there are any others?’

Hannibal doesn't. He suspects Will might have known once, but he is currently curled into a foetal position and rocking back and forth.

'Would you boil some water, please?' he asks, clattering pans to produce the old tin kettle and a large pot. 'I'll go light the fire.'

He goes first to kiss Will on the tip of his head. He's either not angry anymore or too far gone to care. Hannibal feels at his forehead and finds it only pleasantly warm—so why isn't he getting better?

He finds a box of matches by the fireplace. The flame catches quickly on a sketch of his he never finished, the shadow of a figure stalking through the forest behind the house. He will burn all the sketches he has of him, he decides, before he uses wood.

While he's tearing pages out of his sketchbook, his phone rings like a stroke of wonder. It's their closest neighbour, Mr Parr, who likes his quiet and who likes telling Hannibal it is so. They rarely have opportunity to interact, but Will used to bring him some of his catch before he grew ill. Mr Parr likes to mention that to Hannibal, too.

'You got power?' he croaks down the line.

'It just went out,' Hannibal tells him. 'Are you keeping warm, Mr Parr?'

'Nah, I got a generator in the shed.' The static over his voice crests until Hannibal can barely hear him. 'How's the kid?'

'He has a fever,' Hannibal says, the sour taste of it thick in his throat.

'Crap. Alright, look here—just—'

'Hello?'

The signal cuts off then. A crystal ball in the hands of the storm. A translucent cage.

Hannibal hears heaving.

He leaves the sketchbook be and rushes to the bed, where Abigail stands with an awkward hand on the back of Will's neck. When she sees him, she steps back at once, loose with relief.

'He was sick,' she says, as though Hannibal can neither see nor smell.

'There are hot water bottles in the bottom drawer,' he says. 'No, leave that, please. I'll deal with it later. There are candles in the kitchen. Would you make some mint tea and bring it up —'

Will is desperately fighting against a new wave of nausea, sagged into Hannibal like he no longer owns limbs. Hannibal half-carries him up the stairs, rushing past the landing so that no ghosts of the past can tug at them while there, and deposits him on the cold tile beside the toilet bowl, wanting to pray something into his neck but failing to think of the words.

There's nothing to be done. If Will is relapsing, if he's getting worse, if he's going to seize or collapse or lose his mind, there's nothing Hannibal can do. His phone has no signal; the roads are sheeted with ice and dark with power outage. He's afraid that were he to try and open the door again, it would crack in half. Outside there is a thud, echoed in Hannibal's stomach: a nearby tree must have lost a branch.

Abigail brings a candle and a mug of tea. The tiny flame flickers with every rumble of the earth. Hannibal blows on the tea and caresses Will's head as he cries and spits his rot, shushing when he feels the tell-tale tensing of muscle before another spasm pushes stomach acid past his teeth.

They slide along time, helpless and numb. He doesn't know how long it's been, only that the tea has grown cold. Will has nothing left in his stomach at all, and he won't eat even if Hannibal makes food. Hannibal can think of little else.

'I'm sorry,' Will croaks. His forehead is pressed against the side of the bowl, eyes downcast as he wheezes his way through the aftershocks.

'Why?'

Will grimaces.

'It's probably an infection,' Hannibal reassures, aware of how flat it sounds. 'If you don't feel better by morning, we'll go to the ER to get something for it.'

Will doesn't say anything.

'Will.'

He looks up. The fever must have come out of him with the contents of his stomach because his eyes are clearer—like the sky on a summer's dawn.

'*If* it's a relapse,' Hannibal says, 'then we are ready for it. We know what to expect and we know what works. If you get ill again, we know what to do.'

'I won't,' Will promises, as though it's a thing within his power to give.

He pushes his hand across the floor, knuckles sliding on tile. It bumps lightly against Hannibal's ankle.

Hannibal twines their fingers together. The wind knocks against the house. Somewhere far, a siren sounds.

Downstairs, Abigail has her feet inches from the fire, three dogs framing her on each side. Hannibal lowers Will to sit next to her and goes to remake the bed. The stench of vomit is potent enough that he feels it in his head long after it's washed away in the sink.

It's nearing one. In the light of two candles, wicks blackened and curled in on themselves, he defreezes a jar of bullion in a pot of water, then chops some extra vegetables to cook into it. He considers taking out the rest of the freezer and burying everything in the snow outside so

it might live longer, but ultimately decides he lacks the energy for it. He'll cook it up in the morning: for a day or two they'll have food aplenty. After that, there's flour and sugar and eggs. He's got a bag of potatoes under the sink, too, and onions, garlic and beetroot, and if all else fails, he has the cans set to the back of the cabinets like a dirty secret.

The roads will be fine by afternoon, he's sure. He still plans the menu for a full week ahead.

Cold has swallowed the upstairs bedroom, so he moves the mattress back into the lounge and they all sit on it as they eat by the fire, tucked between blankets. Will keeps his bowl set in his lap and watches the two of them eat more than he does anything else; but he dutifully swallows a spoonful whenever Hannibal manages to catch his eye.

They boil more water for the dishes, for the hot water bottles and for tea. Abigail's hands turn red in the heat, but she refuses to wear gloves. 'I'm basking in warmth,' she tells him. When she goes to lie down, she brings Betty with her. The dogs aren't allowed on the mattress, but Will only smiles at them beatifically and continues to be a hypocrite.

The world outside is screaming. Hannibal slides a hot water bottle under Will's duvet and feels his forehead one last time, stalling. He isn't sure what the sleeping arrangements are tonight; it would be perverse to make him sleep in an armchair, but then Will is prone to flashes of the perverse.

'Are you wearing socks?' Will asks. 'I don't want your cold feet in here.'

'I'm wearing socks.'

'Good.'

The bed is soft and warm and too large. On Hannibal's mattress they're pushed together, but here they lie miles apart. He doesn't like it. He wishes he could: this was supposed to be a sweet moment when it came, a hard-won victory. It feels like nothing. The world is screaming still. The tear in Hannibal's lungs breathes warm air, and he feels more alone than he has in a long time.

Will tugs at him until he's moved into the centre of the bed. He arranges Hannibal's arms around him. It quells nothing except the cold.

Hannibal doesn't sleep. He listens to the wind, to the painful creaking of trees bowing into it, to Will's shallow breaths and little moans of pain. Thrice in the night, they struggle up to the bathroom in the light of Hannibal's phone. The first time, Will chokes out the bullion and shivers in Hannibal's arms. The times after, he closes the door on him and suffers alone. Hannibal supposes he should be glad that he cares about privacy, that he's clear enough within himself to feel shame.

In bed, he tucks the hem of Will's T-shirt from the waistband of his sweats and puts his hand on his stomach, fanning out the fingers to cover as much skin as he can. He hasn't urinated since Hannibal got home. It's possible it's just dehydration from the diarrhoea. It's possible it's something else.

Will’s nose and the tips of his ears are blitheringly cold, but everywhere else he is swimming in sweat. Hannibal feels feverish himself, like it’s seeped into him through Will’s skin. Randall’s face drifts into his mind, and for an hour or so he thinks about him without anger, but with a twisted sort of yearning. He has no need for Will’s empathy to recognize in himself a reflection of how Randall feels, and he understands the foolishness of him now, the desperate clutches for power, the infantile need for attention. Hannibal feels abandoned, too, by an idea of a thing that was never true.

He half-dreams, half-remembers his run from his first home, starved and sick and impossible. It snowed then, too; Hannibal was waist-deep in it, fingers stiff with cold and ridges of frost dug into the skin on his face. His back on home, he walked—ran—walked again, further into the woods where he would be safe. He cried silent tears for a while that froze over his cheeks. Then, he didn’t cry at all. Her screams had etched into his chest and he heard them there with every breath; he had no need for any of his own.

He had a fever, too. In the corner of his eye, naked tree branches transmogrified into the claws of demons, the antlers of beasts. It was dangerous to go into the woods alone, without a stick, without the good mittens, without Mischa. He had to. For the first time, it was safer here than it was back *there,* and so he imagined himself a companion: his dark form just behind the first line of trees, snow crunching under his feet, the bear skin thrown over his shoulders. He didn’t speak and he didn’t help Hannibal up when he stumbled; after all, Hannibal hadn’t brought him a thing, not a hard candy or mint or sugar cookie, and he wasn’t owed assistance. But he never left his side, not until Hannibal reached the village and a woman holding a little boy’s hand saw him and screamed for help.

In the end, there is only the self, he imagines saying to Randall. Has Randall heard of Carl Jung? There is only the self and everything else is a reflection, a shadow, Hannibal would say to him, because it is true. Those who do not see it are blind—or perhaps they just aren’t Hannibal.

But if there *were* an other. If we could touch it and feel it and still it would remain other—if the world outside of Hannibal were real.

If we weren’t alone.

Chapter End Notes

There are a few things about this chapter I could never get quite right, but I hope you enjoyed it all the same. Hannibal's final thoughts are one of the first things I wrote down for this fic within the first few weeks of thinking of it - sharing them with you feels like we've hit an important milestone in the story. Thank you to everyone who's got this far ;)

Next chapter, Hannibal is grumpy. And possibly murdery - though that might have to wait until the snow clears up.

The Heart

Chapter Summary

A day snowed-in. Then, Hannibal makes a discovery that changes everything.

Chapter Notes

There is a suggestion of consensual non-consent in this chapter. It is mentioned in a fairly light-hearted way and not acted upon, but I thought I might as well give you a heads-up if this is where you need to tread carefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen: The Heart.

A blinding light wakes Hannibal, thrust from a sky blue as a dream.

Sheets lie plastered to his skin. His hair has stuck together with sweat and been tossed into his eyes. He feels at his face to find a tender line the seam of the pillow has pressed into flesh. The place beside him is empty, gone cold with it.

The bed smells like fever, like last week's clothes, like digestion and sweat and morning breath. Hannibal stumbles out to open the window, but it helps little: the smell has nested in his skin.

Frost has drawn its fantasies on the glass pane. Through their helixes, he sees the undisturbed duvets of snow, brilliant in the sun that sits higher in the sky than Hannibal expected. To the right of the yard, the pristine virgin is threaded with tunnels dug out by boots and knees and wagging tails; woofs and laughter slither through the window cracks with the cool air, bright and new.

He stands still for a moment, watching. He peeled his socks off during the night and his bare toes curl now at the wooden floor's cool kiss. Abigail's scarf has come loose, drawing after her and gathering chips of snow. Will isn't wearing a scarf, which almost gets Hannibal moving, but his face is pink with joy and his eyes are a mirror of the sky. The two of them are patting flesh into the belly of their snowman to balance out the large head. Hannibal can't see well, but he is pretty sure it is wearing one of his scarves.

He slips into a coat and toes on his shoes before he steps outside. Betty lies on the porch, watching with distrust as the rest of the pack frolic in the tall snow.

Will's head whips around when he hears his name called, teeth flashing in the sun. Hannibal feels old and sick and alien.

'Have you eaten?' he asks, voice straining against morning roughness. Will's brows furrow, but before Hannibal can repeat himself, he is trudging back toward the porch, stepping over the fallen tree branch in his way. Further from the house, the white earth is littered with these: black and dead like coal. The world's been torn open, singed and tossed aside by last night's storm; yet the house stands whole, untouched.

'What?' Will is on the bottom step, eyes cutting from Hannibal to Betty and wrinkling with amusement. 'Power's still off by the way. You feeling okay?'

Hannibal isn't, but he's not interested in that conversation. 'Is the snowman wearing my scarf?'

'Yeah—we thought he looked like you.'

Hannibal tries, but he fails to see any resemblance beyond their common taste in scarves. 'Is there a Frosty Will out there who borrowed *your* scarf?'

Will grins. 'It's not that cold.'

'Will—'

'I feel fine today.'

'Did you keep down breakfast?'

'We didn't eat.'

That is it. Hannibal takes him by the elbow and pulls him inside.

He serves grits with stewed berries and a pot of weak tea. Abigail and Will sneak back outside before these are done to add a pebbly frown to the snowman's face, apparently finding the whole thing funny. Hannibal doesn't have an appetite. The food sticks into lumps that barely go down his throat, but he forces himself to finish the bowl.

He makes an attempt to shovel some snow from around the Bentley's wheels, but there's little use to it: their phones have signal again and Abigail wastes no time in informing him the road into Washington is shut. It is for the best anyway, since Will gets it into his head to help him, hefting an extra shovel from the shed as though he hasn't stayed up half the night vomiting. He's trying so desperately to prove himself healthy, Hannibal almost can't be annoyed with him.

He manages to get through to the doctor's office and schedule a phone consult instead, which they have in the study while Abigail takes the dogs out. Will's neurologist is reasonably competent and has a fatherly manner that Will finds calming, though he insists on pretending otherwise. Hannibal hopes to harness both these skills and guide the conversation so that Doctor Nader is prompted into forbidding Will from going outside altogether.

‘Let’s see then,’ Doctor Nader says, ‘I’ve noted down fever, hallucinations, vomiting, diarrhoea and infrequent urination. Is that it?’

‘Yes,’ Will says.

‘Severe confusion,’ Hannibal says. ‘Stomach pain.’

‘Hm. And how are we feeling today, Will?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Alright.’ A shuffle of papers. ‘It sounds to me like you’ve picked up a nasty bug somewhere. I’m prescribing oral rehydration—get that whenever you’re able, and for now just plenty of water and rest—’

‘He was hallucinating,’ Hannibal emphasizes. ‘A brain scan and a lumbar puncture—’

Will glares at him.

‘Look. You’re right to be on high alert. You’re absolutely right. But adults with fevers will hallucinate occasionally. I’m not going to schedule a serious procedure because of one bad night.’

‘Will has limited contact with sources of infection. I’m perfectly healthy.’

‘*You*’ve not been on immunosuppressants for the past few months. Here’s what we’re going to do, alright: Will is going to be careful and pay attention to his body, isn’t he?’

Will rolls his eyes at the phone but doesn’t argue.

‘And Hannibal is going to do the same,’ Doctor Nader presses on. ‘And tomorrow, *if* the weather allows, you’ll come in and we’ll get full morphology and we’ll do antibodies.’

‘And kidney function.’

‘Yes, we’ll do kidney function, too. If anything’s not quite right, we’ll think about investigating further. But for now, I’m ordering light meals, liquids and naps, alright?’

‘Told you,’ Will says after the phone screen goes black.

Hannibal says nothing. He cannot explain the sense in him that something has gone irrevocably wrong and they’re all fools not to realize.

Will climbs astride him and kisses his brow until Hannibal relents. The arms he puts around Will feel stiff.

In his armpit, Will no longer smells of illness, only of a lingering toxicity and sweat.

‘You want to go for a nap?’ Will murmurs into his neck.

‘I’m not the one the doctor ordered naps for.’

‘Power’s off, phone’s dying, can’t go anywhere. What else are you going to do?’

He has a point. If they are trapped inside the snow globe, it’s no use beating himself against the walls.

He sleeps until his arm goes numb with Will’s weight and his collar is drenched in Will’s saliva. After, he makes food as Abigail and Will kill the last of the tablet’s battery watching a movie and complaining about the data bandwidth. The day feels stretched along the edges, both empty and overflowing. Every activity takes more time than it does normally: lunch goes cold by the time they’re done, afternoon coffee turns into evening coffee before any of them notice. Not half hour after they’ve started lighting candles, the power comes back on. To celebrate, they bake dog-shaped butter cookies with a set of cutters Abigail finds in the back of a drawer.

It none of it feels very real. Hannibal finds himself stood aside, looking in on them living the fairy-tale. Will makes a lemon drizzle to go with the cookies and doesn’t ask Hannibal to repeat his instructions even once. Abigail tells them about the streets she walks when she abandons her ward at night: their colours, their sounds, the thrum of life beneath the walls. ‘I just walk,’ she says when Will asks, shrugging. ‘I don’t know. I guess it’s nice to feel like I’m still *in* the world. At the ward, you start to feel like—like you’re not real, you know?’

Hannibal wishes he could feel less real. It might make it easier for him to fit into this night, to forget for a moment the sheen of guile that lies over their loose smiles.

Abigail moves into the upstairs bedroom now that the space heater is functional again. Before she disappears up the stairs, she tells Hannibal good night, and tells it like she knows there’s been a shift—like she knows the liberties she’s allowed herself today were taken because they were taken alongside Will, but also that they have settled into feeling correct and warranted. He smiles at her, though that too feels like a hoax.

He’s not sure whether he hopes that Will asks for him, now that Abigail’s in another room, or if he’s afraid that he might. In any case he doesn’t: he only kisses him, sweet and burning, and curls into his side like he’s a kitten and Hannibal the sun.

In the morning, the temperature spikes, the snow begins to melt, and the world reassumes its ordinary colours.

They all hold their breath as the Bentley hobbles on the dirt road, but they get to the highway without major incident. They drive to Washington first, where Will gets his blood drawn, clutching Hannibal’s hand and glaring at him to ensure he knows he is getting blamed for it. Then, they stop at a café for breakfast. The food is acceptable. The slush outside makes the dense room feel cosier and more pleasant than it is. Will’s foot hooks around Hannibal’s ankle. For a little while, Hannibal is almost happy.

Will has speech therapy next and group, which he agrees to stay for exclusively because, he says, they’re doing meditation today and Will is perfectly capable of sleep sitting up. It is plain he is trying to make things easier for Hannibal: he still has to get Abigail back to the hospital, and see two patients, and then drive back down to D.C. to collect him. He wants to

appreciate it, but he's mostly annoyed that he's not been as subtle about his poor mood as he thought.

They're short of time to get to the ward before Hannibal's first patient, so Abigail comes to the office with him. They have coffee together in the break between one session and the next, and talk about nothing in particular.

She waits to ask him until he is driving her to the hospital, a spent silence nestled comfortably between them.

'The man from the store,' she says.

'You'll be fine in daylight,' he reassures, 'as long as you stay at the ward.'

'What about at night?'

'The problem will be solved by then.'

She stares out the window, keen on not looking at him.

When she gets out of the car, she doesn't say goodbye. Hannibal watches her go into the building, the door closing behind her, the lock turning.

Once he has killed Randall, he thinks, it will all go back to the way it was.

He finds Will worn out and soft. Maybe he really has slept through group. Maybe it's that the nurse has drawn multiple vials of blood from his already weakened body. He doesn't talk on their drive back, eyes fluttering closed and a lax smile teasing at his cheeks. At home, he sags onto the bed and refuses to get up to eat, head dug into a pillow and hands tightening around the duvet to the pulsation of some thought that captivates him.

Hannibal's picked up fresh bread on the way, so he makes him a plate of finger foods: hams and fruit and buttered slices of rustic baguette. Will reclines on the bed and chews languidly, eyes glazed over. The more restless Hannibal grows, the more Will relaxes, his tether to the world slipping until he is grinning at things that aren't there; Hannibal checks his temperature and measures his pulse but must ultimately admit that dehydration and exhaustion are the most likely causes of the mood.

It's a mood that he might have found charming, were he not so anxious himself.

Once he's eaten, Will announces he's going to change into pyjamas early. He removes his clothes but ignores the fresh set Hannibal brings him, content to lie on the bed bare and exposed. Hannibal tries to ignore him: he has to clean and prepare food for tomorrow before he leaves for the night, Will's sedative ground already into his rehydration solution. But it's a challenging thing to ignore, especially when Will elects to roll over onto his stomach and embark on a peculiar game of self-denial, curling his toes and pressing his hips ever so gently into the mattress, then forcing himself to relax again. He's half-hard and clearly eager for more, but he doesn't ask and he doesn't touch, content to balance on the edge.

At last, Hannibal cannot take it anymore and climbs in with him. But when he tries to kiss him, hands stroking down his stomach to tease at his cock, Will shrugs him off.

‘I’m tired,’ he says.

He certainly has a strange way of showing it, but Hannibal isn’t one to argue with Will’s whims. He draws his hands away with the intention of massaging his scalp instead, chastening the kiss he lays on his forehead, but Will whines, intercepts one hand, and tugs it back down.

‘I thought you were tired, Will.’

‘I *am*.’

When Hannibal makes to take him in hand again, Will angles his hips so that his cock escapes the hold and presses into Hannibal’s thigh.

His eyes are closed and his expression serene. He hooks a leg under Hannibal’s, squeezing to the rhythm of breath.

‘Are we playing a game?’ Hannibal asks.

‘No.’ And again, Will squirms away when Hannibal eases a hand between his thighs. He rolls back to press his hips flush into the mattress, out of reach.

‘No? Are you sure?’

‘All real.’

‘If we’re not playing a game—’ Hannibal moves over him slowly, gradually putting more of his weight on Will’s back and ass ‘—then why aren’t you wearing any clothes?’

‘Doc said you should pay attention to my body.’

‘And you were trying to make my job easier?’

‘Yep.’

‘How helpful, Will. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

Hannibal wants to melt into him. He wants to enter him with a finger, two, his cock, his tongue—and then climb deeper, he wants to crawl inside him and feel his muscles shift and adjust around him. He wants to not think of anything that Will isn’t thinking of; he wants his body moulded into a shape that fits into Will’s, he wants his world to be stretched and plucked and balled into whatever Will wishes.

But that is not how it works.

Why can't he stop thinking about it?

He kisses Will on the shoulder and climbs off.

'Meds,' he says roughly. It feels wrong to deny Will something he wants; it snags and pulls at his left lung.

Will doesn't like it either. He huffs as he throws on a robe, drinks his water without looking at Hannibal once or saying *thank you*, and climbs under the duvet after to sulk in silence.

Hannibal has more important things on his mind. He tries to pretend it doesn't bother him.

The sedative is mild enough, but Will is spent and weak. Hannibal watches his chest rise and fall a while, pink sunset dancing on his cheeks. He looks like peace, like sleep, like a soft landing after a long fall. Hannibal wants to get into bed with him and hold him until morning.

He will, he tells himself as he drives, ice box and cleaning supplies in the trunk. He will slice through Randall's stomach, he will pull out all he can find there, and he will plant the hunting knife Abigail used to kill Nick Boyle on the kitchen counter. He will bury Randall's body in the forest where no one will ever find him, then call Jack Crawford and share his concerns about an ex-patient. And once this has all been put behind him, he will forget. He will go home and he will apologize, and grab Will by the wrists and push his head into the mattress until he is gasping and twisting like an eel between his thighs. He will play all the games Will wishes. But he must put an end to *this* game first.

It's dark by the time he pulls up at Randall's apartment. The lights are on full, blasting through every window. He wonders if Randall's trying to keep the dark away or if he is trying draw him in.

He waits in the car until he sees a woman approach. He hurries toward the door with easy confidence, then steps aside to let her through as though he's being courteous. She holds the door open for him.

She goes for the elevator, he takes the stairs. His footsteps echo cold and distant against the bare walls. Excitement rears its head in his chest, but it's muzzled, subdued.

His hand is on the handle when he sees it.

The doormat is crooked.

It is no big thing. Only it lay straight when Hannibal was last here.

One corner is folded. Not on the side of the corridor, where perhaps an awkward step might have accounted for it; it's the top right corner, just by the threshold, pressed close enough that it would have required careful toe-work to disturb.

Hannibal smooths it back nicely, then lifts the side of the mat.

Beneath lies a set of keys.

Something is wrong. It must be. He should not step inside, not until he has revised his threadbare strategy—but light seeps from the creak under the door, entrancing, and he doesn't even realise he is turning the key in the lock until after he's done it.

The door clicks open.

Hannibal smells blood.

As though in a dream, he moves through the lounge, past the bare bulbs overhead and the desk lamps burning ugly yellow. Broken bone litters the kitchen floor, counters swept clear where smears of blood mark a story of struggle—of an animal let loose.

Among the animal jaws, the splashes of hydrogen peroxide, the smashed glass, lies a man torn open, a well where his chest used to be.

He was here.

Hannibal's palm finds the cool wood of the table. He lowers himself to the floor, still faster than intended, still knocking his right knee into a stray bit of bone. A kitchen knife lies on the floor, bent at the handle—what a crude weapon for such a thing, what a poor choice, what resourcefulness. The first strike must have been this, then: the knife sliding into Randall's throat, here, up through his tongue, knocking into teeth. The kitchen knife would have struggled with it, would have bent—it's a miracle it came back out. Randall must have moved in close, too, for such a move to work: he must have been leaning over him, face inches away, breaths intermingling. Eyes peering into eyes when the knife dove. Randall should never have come this close—but Hannibal understands.

His hands tremble as he runs them down the body, noting every wound, every scratch, every deformity. His ribs have been broken roughly, with insistent hands or perhaps the hammer—there's one there, under the table, flung away and forgotten—the lungs were left intact but the heart was cut out artlessly, veins yanked and snapped and shredded. Did he use a serrated knife, did he think he was slicing bread? What *did* he think, to do this so madly, without order? Did he cut himself in the process, did the blood foam and spit on him, did it bathe him hot and red?

Randall's wrists and forearms have been broken too, the bones shattered into dozens of pieces that crackle and shift under Hannibal's prodding. He'd have done that later—it wouldn't have been easy. Maybe he used the hammer again or maybe he pushed down on them with a booted foot. These aren't injuries from the initial struggle, this was an intentional addition, a thing done to a corpse and not a man. *You should not have touched*, *Randall*, Hannibal thinks. *You shouldn't have tried to touch what isn't yours.*

But Hannibal wasn't the one splitting open bone. So perhaps it isn't Hannibal's, either.

Bloody footsteps lead into the bathroom. The steam has escaped by now, but there is still water on the tile, glittering in the piercing glow of the LED above the mirror. He came in here to shower after he'd done it. He'd taken the shoes off—they're heavy-duty walking shoes, blood drained into the inner lining, abandoned in the corner alongside a pile of bloodied clothes. A black pull-over, a pair of dark-grey pants, grey underwear. Cotton and polyester

blends, denim. The fabrics aren't horribly cheap, they will have felt nice enough against skin, but they're still off-the-rack clothes, picked up at a popular chain and sticking out at the shoulders. He shouldn't be wearing cheap clothing. He should be wearing silks and fitted shirts and mother-pearl buttons; although if he is going to get blood and scraps of dead meat all over himself and dump the clothes on the floor after, perhaps it is better if he does not.

His feet would have been bare when he stepped into the shower. The stream would have found its way into every crevice, dripping pink on the tile. That tint is still there, in the puddle, diluted but perceptible at just the right angle.

He was here, he was here, he was here—

Where is the heart?

Did he eat it?

Hannibal traverses the apartment once, then again, looking under furniture and opening drawers. Signs of presence are everywhere: the smell of blood, sweat, the smell of threat. But what did he do with the heart?

Then, he knows.

He rushes back into the kitchen. He yanks open the fridge that whines at the strain. Inside, in a bowl of iced water, it sits: desecrated, wounded, whole.

Most of the ice has melted, but a few rounded chips float on the surface, coloured rosy. Of course the heart is here, of course: Hannibal's hunter was here, he came and he killed the bear for him and now—

Hannibal will fry it up. He should ideally sit both Will and Abigail at the table and serve them what their protector provided—oh, and he *did* come with the storm after all, didn't he? Or maybe he did not, maybe the storm did not birth him but he birthed it: swallowing up the house and the three of them inside, encasing them in glass, keeping them safe.

But the heart might go bad by then. He cannot waste it, that is not allowed.

Just for himself and Will, then, tomorrow at dinner, socked feet and safety. It will be luscious in their mouths, Hannibal will ensure it. They will eat and be fed, and Hannibal knows without knowing that their hunter will be able to tell.

There is another thing that must be done first. Hannibal remembers the bargain.

He sits the bowl by the sink. He steels himself. It's impossible to steel himself for such a thing. That is the point.

He takes the heart in hand and lifts it to his mouth. His lips twitch open, closed, open again.

He bites down.

It is an eruption of cold. It is stale blood, sinewy muscle, it pulls in Hannibal's teeth, it won't be swallowed—how is he to swallow it? His throat rebels, his breath wheezes out of his nose in pained gasps, mouth stuffed full, eyes watering until tears are rolling down his cheeks. Pink saliva runs from the corner of his mouth down his wrist, then drips into the sink, slimy and catching: drip—drip—drip.

Hannibal slams one hand into the wall. He holds himself against it, forehead pressed into his forearm until he sees bursts of colour. Then, he starts chewing. It wouldn't do to swallow it whole: that is hardly the point.

It takes longer than he thought it would. He gags thrice but swallows around it every time. It is what must be done and so he is resolved to do it. When he does, when the last slip of flesh slithers down his throat, he feels *devout.*

The other half of the heart, he will prepare for Will to have tomorrow. He looks at it, assessing; it's not very large, but then Will isn't very hungry these days.

It still bears the marks of his teeth.

Chapter End Notes

At long last, the Other Will is here! But just what is he up to? Or does he even know?

Thank you for reading! This was an exciting chapter to write, so I hope you've enjoyed it :)

The World

Chapter Summary

The morning after Hannibal discovers Randall's body, life in Wolf Trap resumes as normal. Hannibal considers the possibilities that have been revealed before him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixteen: The World.

Hannibal is woken when the ground beneath him shifts.

He jerks stiff, hands clutching at the sides of the mattress for balance. He reached Wolf Trap near dawn and collapsed into a blurry slumber, bristled with sudden spikes of awareness that kept the elusive promise of restoration beyond arm's reach—until just now. He's been dreaming of water, of drifting on dark waves, and the grip on the edge of the mattress is to make sure he doesn't fall in.

'You know what time it is?'

Hannibal does not. He blinks blearily at the shape of Will hovering over him, a shadow in a room full of light.

It is a lot of light, for a morning.

'Why are you sleeping on the floor?'

Hannibal is sleeping on the floor because although he has spent an hour washing the specks of dirt from under his fingernails, he still would have been bringing the smell of corpse and wet earth into Will's bed, and that would not do.

'Well?'

There is entirely too much energy in Will's voice. Hannibal hides his face in the crook of his arm and hopes that if he doesn't engage, Will might leave him alone.

'What's wrong with you today?'

'I didn't sleep well,' Hannibal says.

Will appears to be assessing him.

‘Come on,’ he decides at last. ‘Get breakfast ready and then we’re going on a long, *long* walk. Bit of exercise and you’ll be sleeping just fine.’

Hannibal doesn’t groan, but Will must read it in his silence. He snorts.

‘Up,’ he orders and, with a final kick to the mattress, departs.

It isn’t until Hannibal hears the front door jerked open that the weight of the heat hits. It’s so dense it is like a living thing, pressing into Hannibal’s temples and stopping his breaths short.

He kicks the duvet off, but the mattress itself is like a rock warmed in the sun. The smell of dog around him is boiling.

There’s nothing to be done, then, but get up and go on Will’s punishing trek through the forest.

The world is a warm fog. The previous night an impossibility. Hannibal prepares a simple fare of eggs and mushrooms, but they don’t taste like they do usually. He finds himself closing his eyes against the taste of the coffee Will brews him: the flavour is downy, rich, *voluptuous*. It also makes him sweat in the rising heat. Will dumps half their ice tray into a tall glass and they take turns sipping lemon water, freezing like a memory of summer relief.

They put on walking boots and sunscreen—Will winces through the application like a two-year-old—and they step into the slush of what is left of winter. It’s grey and threaded with grass and dirt, this new world spun on its heel, sloshing and precarious and too bright for Hannibal’s two hours of sleep.

He takes the stairs down the porch slowly, knees aching from the night spent getting blood out of Randall’s floor. The white paint is flaking where he puts his hand. A new coat, he thinks. Not today.

He takes a large step over the trench of sludge, but in mid-air he dithers—because it’s there, a glimmer and the dark snake of leather, dug into the melted snow.

He glances behind him to make sure Will is still battling wills with the lock on the front door. He hunches. He feels around the loosened ice until his fingers snag on the string. His palm dribbles dirty water as it closes around the tusk.

It no longer matters if Randall was the one to leave it on the porch. Randall is dead by another’s hand; if Randall did anything at all that mattered, he did it compelled by another’s will.

The bear tooth *is* a gift. Hannibal hurriedly tucks it back into his pocket, as though to pretend he’d never got rid of it in the first place.

The abortive summer tastes of anxiety, the kind that feels like excitement until it has gone too long unspent. Will walks faster than he normally does and talks about what they must do now that the weather has improved: Casper needs a haircut, Will’s car needs to get washed and started up—it’ll only be a few months until he’s declared seizure-free enough for his driver

license to be reinstated—and they need to get out the summer duvet, and buy ice-cream, and change the lock on the front door. Repaint the porch. Oh, and a garden—would Hannibal stop complaining about the wilted offerings of Whole Foods if he had his own herbs?

Hannibal nods along. From time to time he becomes aware of his index tapping against his palm. His stomach is tight with anticipation. He can feel where his phone lies against his thigh, can feel every shift of it between fabric. He imagines how it might buzz with an incoming text, imagines himself hiding his reaction. He tastes the eagerness of waiting until they've got back from the walk, waiting until they're home and Will has gone upstairs to wash his face, then finally swiping the message open—

What is this feeling, building and swelling in him? He has overtaken Will, who has hung back to see to Casper's hysterics over a leaf twined into his scruff, and he stops now to run his fingers down a lowered branch, thin and scabbed with soft catkins. He resists the urge to call for Will to hurry. He doesn't like being separated like this, not when the woods are alight with possibility. If the Other Will can reach through the border of dream and kill a man in a Washington apartment, then the branches can twine and tighten around a bared throat, a pair of yellow eyes can peer from the bushes, a rabid beast can appear on the path and demand a sacrifice. It's impossible, of course, but it doesn't matter that it's impossible.

Is it fear he feels? Fear of the woods, long buried under years of adulthood, fear of the Other Will and what he might do next, fear of the message never coming?

No. Hannibal isn't afraid of possibility. The world feels large today, large enough to contain him and still leave room for things that aren't his to reign. Hannibal isn't afraid of expanses, of promise, of what's open and stretching ahead. He feels—he feels a little like he used to in childhood, playing in the woods with Mischa, before the real and the imagined were severed and bordered off, before the impossible became a dream. It was a time when Hannibal woke into the world every day—and spent every day walking with the world hand-in-hand.

He knows the message will come, so there is nothing to fear. He knows he cannot know it, but that does not matter. The feeling, then, is this: the giddiness of believing something which you know cannot be true, and *yet.*

Their favourite walking path is at once a swamp and a stream. They hop from stone to fallen branch, balancing on the forest's offerings as though they are playing a children's game. Will's equilibrium is a little off on the good days and thoroughly amusing on the bad, and he repeatedly clutches Hannibal's shoulders to stop himself tumbling sideways. This eventually results in the both of them ending up ankle-deep in a particularly murky puddle, splashing dirt and grabbing at each other in the timeless surprise of slipping.

Hannibal wonders if the Other Will has good balance. If that is something he has kept for himself, if that is why his Will lacks it.

Does that mean the Other Will does not laugh like his Will is laughing now, teeth and rumbling chest and blushing cheeks? He can't imagine the Other Will laughing with this same pure glee. His laughter would be mercurial, dry, cruel. Cutting.

Will has taken him right past the border into a world of fairies and monsters, so reason strikes Hannibal as futile. But even fairy-tales are governed by rules, so he plucks from memory every possible law of narrative form and sets them into the warm clay of what he knows.

This is what he knows: Will Graham's mind turned against him. Will Graham's mind killed his host and Hannibal watched it happen. Will Graham went into the woods and found there his shadow, and when he brought it over the boundary into the light, Will Graham died. He left behind these two ghosts, both intent on haunting Hannibal till his dying day—only they are material, they can be touched and spoken with, they breathe warm air and bleed hot blood. If these twin lone fragments of Will Graham's soul wreak havoc wherever Hannibal allows, what could they do if they were forced back together?

Could they be forced back together? Could a full Will Graham rise from the dead if the split were healed? If, somehow, Hannibal recreated the moment of the divide, if he traced each edge where Will Graham shattered, if he could bring the story full circle?

He has no idea how one would go about such a thing. It doesn't matter. The future stretches before him, and he takes Will's hand to help him step over a fallen tree, and carries over Betty and Buster and Zoe and Lana and Chip—and he knows he is right, he knows he will prevail, just as he knows the message will come.

The message doesn't come. They exhaust themselves walking and still it doesn't come.

Hannibal gets groceries while Will naps. Still it doesn't come.

He gets them pistachio ice-cream, like he used to enjoy as a young man. It won't taste the same as it did from the gelateria on the corner, it won't taste the same as it did in the dry heat of a starched evening at nineteen. The anticipation of this disappointment makes Hannibal want to squirm and smile.

Later, on the porch under a clear sky, Will smiles at him from above his bowl. His feet are bare, propped up on the railing, legs and neck elongated by the stretch. The spoon clunks on the brim when he's done, his body tensed ready to move on to the next item on his agenda.

Hannibal imagines telling him about the Florentine gelateria, the crunch in the pistachio ice-cream he bought there, the long evenings. How he sat on a bench and ate slowly so it would last him his waiting. It felt like waiting; he hadn't been in Florence long by the time he discovered this spot in the shade, his life had not yet begun proper. He was young enough that he wished still to be swept into wonders, to fall into miraculous coincidences. Perhaps he'd been waiting for the moment to stand up and make his wonders himself.

Perhaps he'd been waiting for the same thing he's waiting for now.

He doesn't tell Will about the gelateria. Florence is still pure of Will's invasion.

He likes it that the message isn't coming. He wants this nervousness with him forever, the energy that pulls his muscles tight around bone.

This energy he feels is reflected in Will, but Will cannot possibly be waiting for the same thing. What is he waiting for? Summer, maybe. A date crossed out on the calendar. He has lived through the storm and emerged with a sheen to his eyes; he deserves to be celebrated with prosecco and picnics in the full sun.

The day's energies culminate when Will gets into his truck—Hannibal hoovered first, but it still smells stale and dusty—and wraps his fingers around the wheel like he's not quite sure he remembers how. Maybe this is what he's been waiting for. It's a prickle of cold to realize he may have been missing this freedom—to think that Hannibal isn't enough.

For a moment, he hopes Will *is* getting worse—worse enough to never drive himself again.

Will turns the key in the ignition.

Nothing happens.

He does it again, then looks to Hannibal questioningly. Hannibal lowers himself into the car to try too.

'Oh, goddamn it! It's probably the battery. This is what happens when you leave the car standing all winter—you couldn't take it out for a drive *one time?*'

'I didn't realize that was a necessity,' Hannibal says drily.

'You took the dogs to the vet's and it didn't occur to you to take my car? Never crossed your mind?'

'It's an old car, Will,' Hannibal points out. 'Failures are to be expected.'

'Expected—' Will looks like he's trying very hard not to hit him. There's anger in the line of his jaw, in the way his mouth curls over his bared teeth. 'You can't leave cars to stand idle for months. Not in winter, Hannibal.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Of course you didn't. You probably buy a new one every time it needs a change of motor oil.'

'No, Will.' Hannibal is grasping at patience. This isn't a patient day. 'When my car needs a change of oil, I call a mechanic. Which is what I'm doing now.'

'No!'

Will makes to grab the phone away from him, but instead knocks it from Hannibal's hand. It falls onto the protruding metal in the edge of the open door, bounces, then splashes grime on Hannibal's shoes as it meets the ground.

Hannibal bends to pick it up, keeping his eyes off Will's face.

The phone blinks alive. A crack runs the length of the screen, blurring the pixels on either side.

‘We’re not calling a mechanic to deal with a dead battery,’ Will grouses. His cheeks are red.

‘Very well. I’m going to make dinner.’

‘We can try to take it out and recharge it. Might work.’

‘Good luck.’

‘Seriously? You’re not going to help me?’

‘As I’ve said, I’m going to make dinner.’

He catches sight of Will opening his mouth again. He turns sharply to indicate he has no interest in hearing it.

He sets out the ingredients for dinner with more force than necessary. He pulls the fridge open like it’s a statement, like there’s any chance Will might hear the whine of the worn hinges from all the way outside. He is more upset than is remotely reasonable. He has the dinner planned out, every spice and every step, and it does still stir in him something hot and urgent when he lays Randall’s heart out on the cutting board—but he also imagines dumping it down the garbage disposal.

But that would be a slight against the *Other* Will.

He should not conflate them.

Have they been conflated once? He still doesn’t know for sure.

He wants to ask. He wants to pull his cracked phone out of his pocket and end this silence—but he will not be the first to write. Especially not with the way Will is acting.

Wrong Will, he reminds himself.

The meal is about ready, the kitchen bellied with the smell of rosemary and thyme, when Will deigns to make an appearance. He smells of sweat and motor oil. Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge him.

He’s arranging the red cabbage and escarole lettuce on their plates when arms snake around his waist, tugging him back into Will’s heated body. A pointy chin digs into Hannibal’s shoulder.

‘Do you really call a mechanic to change your oil, or were you just making a point?’

Hannibal doesn’t answer.

Will’s laughter reverberates in his neck, travelling across skin. He attempts to shrug him off, but that only makes him tighten his arms more.

‘I’ll change your oil for you,’ Will says. ‘How about that?’

‘Thank you, but I am happy with my current mechanic.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Jorge is a very polite young man.’

‘He pretty?’

‘I fail to see how that’s relevant.’

‘That’s a yes. And I bet he never broke your phone in a fit of temper, huh?’

Hannibal decides he isn’t going to be allayed. Not with poor humour and lazy attempts at flirtation, not when he can feel Will’s sweat seeping into his own clean shirt.

‘You did not break my phone in a fit of temper. The phone was an accident and it is entirely beside the point. If you don’t understand that much, then I fear you might be more brain-damaged than we thought.’

Will has the gall to laugh again.

‘Oof,’ he says exaggeratedly. Hannibal wants to smack him.

‘Shower before dinner,’ he orders. ‘Do not argue with me.’

‘I would never.’

The kiss Will plants on his cheek before he thuds upstairs has the air of finality. The argument is apparently over, but that same energy twists Hannibal’s guts regardless—a fight hasn’t spent it, a walk hasn’t spent it, cooking hasn’t spent it, where else is he meant to put it? A panic attack, he thinks to himself idly; that isn’t a thing Hannibal partakes in, but maybe Will needs to have one before he settles. Or at least an orgasm. What an odd day this is.

It will occur to him later that the day is odd because it is an end—and a beginning. He will look back on Will’s anger and ambition and recognize them as the final shocks that run through a body before it sags. He will think about how easy it is, too, to mistake anxiety for happiness.

But that evening he watches Will put a morsel of Randall’s heart into his mouth, plump wine-coloured lips closing around the glint of the fork like a Venus flytrap, and he thinks only that he *can* argue with him now. It’s the normal thing. Will isn’t an empty glass that will break should Hannibal let go—an *old mug*, he remembers fondly, Will’s voice from another life echoing in his ears. The fear that stalked them these past months is relinquished then, and for a few hours Hannibal can see their future: long weeks of convincing Will he needs a new car, fresh herbs from the garden, an opera night bought with the shame of pleading, fights and huffs and bared necks. And Will in the centre, growing stronger every day, keeping whole.

There are still things that would break him. But these things are not for Will to worry about: there is another, whose hands are cold and whose lips are stained with blood not wine, another who delivers sustenance to their table. Will need only enjoy it—and does.

Even if he knew how to force the two Wills back together again, would he? Could he? Or would the mould of them stagger for a few short moments until one inevitably destroyed the other?

Will Graham couldn't live with his shadow. If purging him of it gave Hannibal his Will, then perhaps he's made the best choice available to him.

After he has swallowed the final bite, Will takes the dogs outside for one last run, and Hannibal gathers the dishes into the sink. Through the haze comes unbidden a memory, half-forgotten: standing here like this, shoulders and eyes aching, hands moving of their own accord as he stared into the foam and wished to return to a life he'd left behind. He didn't realize then that he'd left it behind. He thought Wolf Trap would be a chapter, not a tome. He was tired.

He is not tired now. He hasn't been, not in that way, not for a long time.

What is he waiting for? A passer-by to sweep him into a new story? For the ice-cream to finish so he can do this all over again tomorrow?

He pats his hands dry with the kitchen cloth—it needs a wash—and slips out his phone.

He cycles through several openings before he settles on direct.

Why did you kill Randall?

He waits a heartbeat, another. It crosses his mind there's no one on the other side of this line. It crosses his mind that he finds the idea preposterous even as he thinks it.

Then,

Don't ask dumb questions, Hannibal

He's never used Hannibal's name before.

But there is no need to keep up charades. Hannibal believes in him now: they can speak plainly.

Donald Sutcliffe and Randall Tier: a threat past and a threat present, he writes leisurely, the pleasure too delicious to be rushed. *I wonder if there are any threats future that I should know about.*

You mean except you

Hannibal presses his smile back into his teeth. *Who would I be a threat to?*

He imagines the Other Will's snort of wry amusement: a bitter, callous thing.

You're a threat to the world at large, Hannibal. Pretty sure you're a threat to yourself. You're too destructive by nature to help it

You've been the one effecting destruction so far, Hannibal points out. He's feeling too giddy to stand still, but the cramped kitchen doesn't lend itself to fidgeting. *I only arrived in time to see the aftermath. Quite the messy boy you are.*

He waits.

The phone gives a buzz.

That might work on your lapdog. You don't talk to me that way

A line of hemp rope, rough and unyielding, twists around Hannibal's stomach—tightens.

I apologize, he types, though he doesn't feel at all sorry.

Good

There's silence now. With every minute, the *good* sounds more definitive, but Hannibal is nowhere near done.

He shifts his weight to the right, peering out through the doorway. Across the length of the house, the front door rests shut. Will's silhouette doesn't darken the porch light. Still playing with the dogs then.

Perhaps what I saw was less destruction, he writes, feeling horribly as though he's trying to placate him, *and more chaos. Chaos is creative.*

Nothing. Annoyance rises in Hannibal's chest.

Did it create you?

It's an afterthought, but if comparing the Other Will to God doesn't soothe his bristles, surely nothing will.

A moment, and then,

Nothing created me

Hannibal grins. He has adulated, now he must antagonize.

Will created you, he baits.

This time, the response is immediate.

No. I created him

Hannibal isn't sure he believes that either, but he's willing to gloss over the technicalities.

Thank you then, he writes instead. *That is the second gift you've given me.*

He's fishing for a mention of the talisman, but none comes. The Other Will doesn't like to volunteer information.

And now the heart, he adds. *We enjoyed it for dinner tonight.*

I'm sure you did

I feel indebted. Is there anything you might like in return?

A brief pause.

First buzz: *I want a fucking ferrari*

On its toes, a second: *what the hell?*

And third, *you really think it's that simple?*

Hannibal doesn't imagine any of this will be simple.

I wasn't offering money.

What are you offering?

Anything.

That gives him pause. Or at least Hannibal imagines it that way: his face creased, his hand tugging ineffectually at the fraying sleeve of his sweater. That's a mannerism of his Will, though, not the *Other*—he doesn't know what the Other Will looks like when he's pedalling back from an assumption, when he's made bashful or insecure. He doesn't even know where the Other Will is. If he's real enough to kill and real enough for off-the-rack clothes and rushed texts, he is real enough for showers, breakfasts. Beds. Or does he retreat into the woods after each manifestation, strip until he is bare, wrap himself in bear skin and pull salmon from the stream to satiate his hunger—and then crawl into a fox hole to hibernate until a message from Hannibal disturbs his slumber?

Really?

Hannibal is about to tell him yes, but then another text follows the first—without the aid of cadence, it's hard to tell when he's being rhetorical.

Would you march into Jack Crawford's office and tell him you're the Chesapeake Ripper?

Would you slice your house pet open and leave him for his pack to eat?

Do not make promises you can't keep, Hannibal.

Something like fear teases at Hannibal's heart, but it's the fear of the abject more than the real: a fairy-tale fear that only makes him grow in his wonder.

You would not ask these things of me.

Why not

You killed Donald Sutcliffe because he hurt Will. You broke Randall's hands because he was palming at what's rightfully yours. And he is yours. You have made that clear.

He *isn't* his, of course. He is Hannibal's. As enamoured as he is with the concept of this Other, there are concessions he is not willing to make—and it would be meaningless in either case, since Will *is* Hannibal's and that is an immutable truth. But one does not list off facts to a fairy-tale creature.

Oh yeah? the creature says, and it's almost like Hannibal can hear him: the rise in inflection at the end of the mockery, the lift of his eyebrow, the sizzle of a fire that licks at his bare thighs and lights his face up godly. *And who put him in the hospital?*

I did that, Hannibal reminds him, torn between possessiveness and obfuscation. *Not you.*

The Other Will smiles.

'Exactly,' he says. The woods around them are at a perfect lull, as though even the grasshoppers are waiting on him to finish speaking. Despite the fire, his eyes are black; despite the glow of warmth, his body is covered in goosebumps. 'Being mine doesn't make you any safer, Hannibal. Don't delude yourself into thinking otherwise.'

Sparks rise from the fire as the Other Will drops something in. It doesn't look much like wood to Hannibal, and indeed it's followed by a plume of black smoke and the sharp stench of burning plastic—a candy wrapper, he realizes.

Then he blinks, and the woods are gone.

He stares at the final message, searching for the foreboding he is sure the Other Will meant for him to feel—but he sees only that one word, *mine,* right where the crack runs through the screen.

The front door bangs open.

'Hey! Settle!'

Hannibal slips the phone back into his pocket and turns around to face the sink. He picks up the nearest pan to busy his hands and listens to the patter of paws and Will's soft praises until he is sure the blush of excitement has gone from his cheeks.

'No sheets on the bed.' Will breezes past him to reach the sink, spraying water on Hannibal's shirt as he turns the tap. He pats some into his face, reddened from the exercise. 'You still not done?'

'I was going to dress it with clean sheets tonight. I'll do it now.'

'And get the mattress upstairs, it's in the way.'

'Yes.'

Will takes the pan out of his hands. His hip grazes Hannibal's.

'What?' he snaps, defensive. 'I can't do the dishes?'

'You can. You don't.'

Will gives a huff, sidestepping truth. 'You've still got to shower,' he reminds him. 'It'll be faster this way, and I want to go to bed. Give me some room to work in, huh?'

Hannibal edges away, but only just. He watches Will's hands, deft with the sponge, the splatter of water on his T-shirt. His jaw clenches when a fork threatens to slide from his grip, his throat bobs as he swallows around an unvoiced curse. His hair is growing in again, a few curls plastered to the pink skin of the neck—is it a blush of exertion or a blush of self-awareness? Why is he being so kind tonight: is it the weather or the argument? Perhaps Hannibal should drive into D.C. and get the newest, flashiest phone money can buy, so that Will can break that next?

'It won't be any faster if you stand here and stare,' Will points out, lips twitching with pleasure.

I love you, Hannibal thinks. *I love you.*

'What?'

'I didn't say anything, Will.'

'No, but you're staring real loud.'

It's not a realization, it's not anything he didn't know before. But he has never said the words, not like this, not even to himself. In his head, he can't stop saying them. They burn into him with every breath, every blink. He can't look away, but he's worried he will go blind from the sight of him.

He stays and watches until Will is red-faced, twitching away from his gaze and leaning into it. He follows closely behind as Will leads the way into the bedroom, where he leans against the wall to watch Hannibal dress the bed. Then, Hannibal kneels on the floor of the lounge and strips the mattress, and Will watches him do that too: perched on the edge of the bed, then reclining back on his elbows, teeth pressed into his bottom lip. Hannibal feels stalked; he feels hunted. He feels as though he is in the woods still, as though the set of eyes watching him from the bushes are a bottomless black, perfectly hidden in the folds of night.

His lips feel dry. He wets them.

'What?' he echoes Will's question. It sounds wrong when he says it: bare and uncouth where Will's came off roguish.

Will blinks at him once. Then, ever so slightly, he pushes his knees wider.

'You've got a pretty mouth,' he says.

I love you, Hannibal thinks.

He folds the sheets, fighting to keep the smile off his face, and puts them into the correct drawer. He doesn't rush; if anything, he takes extra care to smooth out all the wrinkles, ignoring Will's whine of impatience.

When he kneels on the floor at the foot of the bed, Will's thighs bracketing him on either side; when he tugs his pants off and hooks an arm under each knee to hoist Will's legs over his shoulders; when he finds him already hard and writhing at the first lick—he doesn't think *I love you.* He thinks, *I will have you now, and later.* He thinks, *I will have them both, my two ghosts.* This Other Will, he will hunt down until he is out of breath, and he will wrestle him to the ground and bite into the jugular. And his Will, he will have safe and pure of fear, clean of nightmares, the king of their abode, kept content and sweet by his shadow's torment and by Hannibal's tongue.

He could never have had Will Graham. He knew as much then and he knows it now.

But he *can* have him. In a way.

Later, he will pull his shirt off in the bathroom and admire the bruises blooming over his shoulder blades where Will's heels dug painfully every time he jostled him closer to choking. He will see them and he will think of both Wills at once, and then he will see the future: full of light and promise, riddled with paths to take, stretching backward and forward in time, pistachio ice-cream and purple blood and *I love you.*

And then, though it won't be that night and it won't be the next—but it *will* be soon—then, the light of it will go off.

Chapter End Notes

Someone should explain to Hannibal that is not how apology blow jobs are supposed to work.
In all seriousness, this chapter wrote itself and I enjoyed that tremendously. Let me know what you think and whether you are Team Will or Team Other Will - I'm making T-shirts.
(I am not actually making T-shirts)

The Cavern

Chapter Summary

> Randall Tier's death helps tie up loose ends. Hannibal and Abigail do some family bonding over blackmail. Bedelia and Will have words. And it seems that the Other Will might like a gift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventeen: The Cavern.

‘Alright. What can you tell me about Randall Tier?’

‘He’s creepy,’ Abigail says cheerfully, meeting Jack’s gaze head-on.

‘Anything else?’

‘That’s the gist.’

Jack harrumphs a little but seems to grudgingly accept that some lip is par for the course after months of mutual hostility. Today, Abigail is not a suspect: she’s sitting in the interrogation room as though she might be, but Alana is right by her side, limbs arranged into a posture that’s alert but permissive. Abigail is an asset today, and Jack goes as far as to bring her a coffee from the cafeteria as a gesture of good will.

‘Abigail,’ Alana chastises, but Jack holds up a hand to stop her.

‘No,’ he says gruffly. ‘No. We’ll do it this way: I’ll tell you what I know about Randall Tier and you’ll fill in the blanks.’

Abigail gives a nod. Neither Jack nor Alana will be able to see it, but through the Venetian mirror, Hannibal watches her ankles rubbing together under the table as she tries to keep herself composed.

‘I know Randall Tier was a patient of Doctor Lecter’s. I know he had trouble with boundaries and I know at some point last year he developed an obsessive interest not only in Doctor Lecter, but possibly in you. I know that because Doctor Lecter called me a few days ago to tell me about it. Apparently, you ran into Tier at the mall together.’

‘Yes,’ Abigail confirms dully. ‘We did.’

‘And then you told Doctor Lecter you’d seen him before.’

‘Yes,’ Abigail says again, tone perfectly even. ‘A few times in town. He offered to pick me up from the ward one time.’

‘How would you describe that relationship?’

‘It wasn’t a relationship. He read Tattle Crime and he thought that made us confidants.’

‘So let me get this straight.’ Jack adjusts a little in his seat, leaning forward to catch her eye again. ‘A disturbed young man stalks you for months and you don’t think to mention it to us.’

‘Why would I mention it to you?’

Jack bloats a little with outrage. Alana looks torn between amusement and disapproval.

‘I thought people just got restraining orders,’ Abigail explains idly. ‘I was fine. I thought he’d get bored.’

‘I’m going to make something clear to you right now. Someone *creepy* takes an interest in you, you go to the police. I don’t care if you think he’s the impatient type. That’s one. Two, you were involved in a high-profile murder case. Multiple high-profile murder cases. So next time someone creepy takes any kind of interest in you, you pick up the phone and call me. Do we have a deal?’

Abigail looks down at her hands, folded tightly in her lap. ‘Fine,’ she says.

‘Good.’ Jack deflates a little. ‘Good. Maybe you can be a good influence on Doctor Lecter. Teach him to pick up the phone a little sooner, too. I don’t want either of you on my conscience, you hear that?’

That gets half a smile out of her, which is a lot under the circumstances. Hannibal must admit he’s impressed.

‘After Doctor Lecter called, we went to pay Tier a visit,’ Jack relates. Abigail does a good enough job paying attention, as though she hadn’t already heard the story from Hannibal. ‘He wasn’t home. We’re thinking he got spooked, because he left evidence behind—either he left in a hurry, or he wanted us to know. Maybe he wanted you to know. We found a piece of Cassie Boyle’s rib in his little crafts project, and the hunting knife that matches the wounds on Nick Boyle.’

That gets a reaction. It’s the minutest shift in her features, it’s a drawn breath—and her eyes slide over the mirror as though searching for Hannibal’s, either to thank or condemn him for this gamble. He has told her he got rid of the knife; he has not told her he planted it in Randall’s kitchen. Naturally, he has also neglected to inform her he had easy access to parts of Cassie Boyle. He was counting on genuine surprise selling the act, though now that he’s seen it, he no longer believes she needed the extra help.

‘Why would he kill Cassie Boyle?’ she sounds breathless. ‘I mean, did he know her, or—’

‘I can’t comment on an ongoing investigation,’ Jack says, as though that’s not what he’s been doing all along. ‘We don’t know. Maybe he did. Maybe he was suggestible and wanted to

show off in front of Doctor Lecter and the FBI. It would fit the profile we have of him.'

The profile Hannibal supplied.

'But—' she checks herself. Her mind, whirring behind the bright windows of her eyes, shutters quickly to stop Jack seeing the thoughts fast-forming—she is too enmeshed, now, too far gone, to say aloud that she's just been handed proof that Hannibal killed Cassie Boyle.

'Do you think Nick Boyle found out that Tier killed his sister?' Alana asks. 'Could he have confronted him?'

'Or they bumped into each other stalking Miss I Was Fine.' Jack shoots Abigail a heavy look. 'Like I said, it's an ongoing investigation.'

Hannibal waits for them in the corridor. Abigail asks him to guard her hoodie, then goes to the restroom to panic in peace. Alana releases a breath and leans against the wall, shielding her eyes from the blaze of sunlight that bursts through the large window. Jack's hand lands on Hannibal's shoulder, then drops; it's as though he's reassuring himself he's solid. He's lost Will to the world of spectres already—it is clear he nurses close to his chest a fear of another slipping.

'I understand you're not able to comment on an ongoing investigation,' Hannibal echoes, catching the flash of Alana's smirk in the corner of his eye, 'but I am trying to understand the progression of events. Garrett Jacob Hobbs kills his girls, Randall Tier kills Cassie Boyle for attention, Nick Boyle kills Marissa Shurr in grief, and finally Randall kills Mr Boyle either in self-defence or out of possessiveness?'

'Sounds about right,' Jack says. 'Neat, isn't it?'

'It is.'

'Yeah.' He shakes his head, eyes fixing on a passing agent. 'A little too neat for my liking.'

Hannibal doesn't see how anything can ever be too neat, but he elects not to say so.

'Anyway. I'll let you go for today. Don't leave the state and all that, we might need you again —hell, you both know the drill by now.'

They exchange final pleasantries: love is passed on for Jack's wife, a question about Will's health is brushed over with a platitude—and Jack disappears into the bowels of the Bureau, his wide back fading into the sea of dark suits.

'That went better than I thought it would,' Alana decides. 'God, I hope this is the last of it.'

'An early night, Doctor Bloom. We are not yet out of flu season.'

'I need a drink,' she huffs. 'That's what I need.'

She regards him a moment: his face, his hands folded over the fabric of the hoodie. When she looks away, there's something like pain in her pinched expression, though she smooths that

out the same way she did the earlier weariness.

‘Do you want to go check on her?’

He does, but now he’s curious. ‘Perhaps you should,’ he suggests.

Alana laughs, bitter. ‘Don’t do that, Hannibal.’

For a moment, they’re silent. Hannibal recognizes this is a bizarre place for the conversation they seem to be having, even as he remains unsure what exactly that is.

‘It isn’t my intention to alienate you,’ he says carefully. ‘Or usurp your role in Abigail’s life.’

She swallows, eyes fixed on the ceiling. ‘It does feel like you’re stealing them from me, sometimes,’ she says at last. ‘But I recognize that’s not what’s happening. I don’t aspire to play any role in Abigail’s life beyond that of a counsellor. You’re not taking that away from me, you’re just crossing boundaries that I would never cross. Same as you did with Will.’

‘And you disapprove.’

‘Does it matter if I disapprove?’

‘It matters,’ Hannibal says, ‘but I imagine it doesn’t matter enough.’

‘Yes.’ She smiles grimly. ‘I know.’

Another stretch of silence. A trainee rushes past, eager to get to whatever obligation he’s missing. The floors smell headily of polish, twisting a headache into Hannibal’s frontal lobe.

‘I just look at you sometimes,’ she speaks again, ‘and I see how you are with each other. And I know I couldn’t have that with him. You know? Because there was a point when I wanted it and he wanted it, and then I talked myself out of wanting it. It was easy. There were a lot of good reasons. There always are.’

Hannibal says nothing. He is sure whatever reasons she had for staying away from Will Graham, his were better.

‘But you ignored them. Every reason. Every boundary. Everything. I just can’t imagine doing that, I can’t imagine having that sort of connection. Instead, I feel like I’m giving so much of myself away, I’m putting in all this effort—with Will, with Abigail, with you—and I do it right, I always do it right, but then I’m left behind. And I’m left with nothing.’

He doesn’t quite know what to say to her at first. The notion that she might fear herself incapable of genuine connection with others and look to him for guidance is laughable at best; but he tucks away the irony to marvel at later, and imagines they are in his office, where the world makes perfect sense.

‘Strength and kindness are a blessing to those around us, but often a curse upon ourselves. Empathy can be corrosive if left unchecked.’

Her lip twitches upward. ‘Are we talking about Will Graham?’

Their eyes meet now, if only briefly. Hannibal smiles.

‘What’s your advice, then?’ Her tone is forcefully bright. ‘Based on your extensive study of this corrosive empathy?’

‘I recommend exercising selfishness.’

‘Oh?’

‘I have found it can have a healing effect. In certain contexts, it is also quite fetching.’

‘Hannibal!’

Her mock outrage colours her cheeks. Hannibal enjoys that more than her disapproval, and she seems to agree.

He doesn’t immediately go to find Abigail, well-aware that part of her discomfort is directly resultant from his own actions and thus best experienced in solitude. He walks Alana to her classroom—Will’s classroom, once upon a time, the hall echoing empty without the timbre of his presence to fill it—and then he calls home.

He calls often, these days, when he’s out. It’s not a compulsion yet but well on its way to becoming one: he feels uncertain if he doesn’t call, and when he feels uncertain the old doubt creeps in. What if he finds Wolf Trap caving dark and empty when he returns, only the echoes of Will’s footsteps reverberating across the skeleton of a dead house?

Will’s blood tests came back. They showed only a minor abnormality in kidney function. Much to Will’s dismay, they were called back for a redraw, and when that came back fine, Doctor Nader wrote the whole thing off as a ‘fluke’ and told Hannibal to take it easy. Will found this very funny, but then Will didn’t realize Hannibal had spent the nights between the tests with his hands fanned across his lower back, thinking intently of urate serums and toxins and the monumental filtration plant he has once visited in Chicago. Hannibal does not habitually hold with ideas of manifesting one’s desires through virtue of thinking alone—that is a recent obsession of Franklyn’s, not his own—but Will is different.

Will is a manifestation already.

Will Graham is dead, the Other Will told him last week. *We’re both just afterthoughts.*

Hannibal is of the opinion that Will’s lapse in kidney function and the Other Will’s stir of activity are not merely concurrent but correlated. When he shared this theory with the Other Will, he was met with radio silence; until two days later he received an unexpected text in the middle of a session, which said only,

You’re thinking him into existence

It was not a question, nor was it confirmation. Hannibal replied anyway.

Perhaps I'm thinking you into existence, too.

Don't be cocky. You're not thinking shit

They have yet to resolve this argument. This would be significantly easier if the Other Will deigned to inform him what he thought of the topic, besides disagreeing with anything Hannibal had to say.

'Hey,' Will's voice rings clear in his ear, warm and rough. Hannibal considers biting his lip but doesn't go through with it.

'Hello, Will.'

'Well?'

'We were both interrogated. Jack seems satisfied for now. He asked me to give you his best.'

A shuffle: he's in the middle of something. 'Are you coming back?'

'I might take Abigail to lunch.' It would be the wise thing after today's revelations. 'I should be back by four.'

'Alright. Beverly's coming in a minute, so anything you're not telling me I'm gonna find out anyway. With that in mind—?'

Hannibal has nothing more to share that Beverly would know about, he decides, warmed by the warning etched into Will's tone. 'I trust Beverly to keep you well-informed,' he says. 'Though I would prefer it if you didn't hound her for every grisly detail.'

'Don't go around getting stalked by serial killers then.' Will's voice is nothing but acid: Hannibal thought his anger had burnt itself away during their initial conversation on Randall last night, but it must have risen from the ashes with dawn. 'You want me away from this stuff, don't go dragging it home.'

'I am doing my best not to.'

'Yeah, well, your best isn't great, is it? I wouldn't be surprised if I found more stalkers with a violent streak if I looked through your patient files. 'Cause that's a normal thing not to mention to anyone ever. You know what? That's what I want for my birthday. A fucking *list.*'

'If that's your wish,' Hannibal agrees easily. 'Though you'll be disappointed to know that the only patient currently aspiring to follow me around is the sweet gentleman we met at Samantha's gallery opening. I worry his proclivity for violence is minimal.'

'If you're not home by four,' Will bites, 'I'm going to assume you were murdered. Goodbye.'

The line clicks silent. Hannibal runs his thumb over the crack in the middle of the screen, thinking about Will a moment longer: blood gushing through an intricate system of tubes thin as hairs, stomach acid rising taller at the workings of the throat, the warmth of a beating heart clinging to life.

Then, he goes to find Abigail.

‘I think perhaps a conversation is in order,’ he tells her as he passes over the hoodie, which she promptly pulls on: cold again. ‘And some sustenance.’

‘Fine.’

When he opens the front door to the Baltimore house, he can sense immediately it is not the house he has left. He hasn’t been over since the night he discovered Randall’s body, when he drove back to Baltimore to produce Abigail’s hunting knife and Cassie Boyle’s rib, but Abigail must have visited in the interim. There’s a scuff mark on the wall where there wasn’t such before, the result of a carelessly thrown shoe or a door banged open. The smell of fried foods lingers in the kitchen, and when Hannibal goes up to use the bathroom, he finds the mirror newly wiped and the showerhead set just an inch off its usual mark. He is amused both by the insolence of her using the ensuite rather than the guest bathroom, and by the attempt to dispose of the evidence.

He leaves the showerhead be. He thinks about scrubbing at the scuff mark on the hallway wall but ultimately decides it’s better left alone. Houses should not stand idle lest they die. He doesn’t wish for this one to succumb to a haunting, and the basement has produced plenty prospective candidates for such a task.

They set to preparing lunch together: a simple red bell pepper pesto and fresh gnocchi baked into a dish with mozzarella and a sprinkling of truffles. It’s the sort of meal Hannibal might have made for himself when he was a student in Italy, on the old counter squished between the fridge and the hole in the wall that served as ventilation, sweat from a summer afternoon setting damp and itchy over his top lip.

‘I hope we can put Randall Tier behind us now,’ he begins conversationally as the blender quietens down. He stirs the pesto—it needs a little more oil. ‘As well as, perhaps, the matter of Nick Boyle. How does that make you feel?’

Abigail seems to struggle between voicing her opinion and burying it *deep*. Hannibal is counting on her boldness.

She draws in a shaky breath, then fastens the ties on a mask of perfect indifference ‘We’re putting Cassie Boyle and Marissa behind, too,’ she says without looking at him. ‘How does *that* make you feel?’

‘It makes me feel good.’ Hannibal smiles. ‘I enjoy closing a chapter; it makes room for a new one.’

‘It’s a little hard to close a chapter when I don’t know what other incriminating evidence you’re holding onto.’

Hannibal affects confusion. ‘How do you mean?’

‘You told me you’d get rid of the knife.’

‘I was going to, before I decided it could be repurposed instead. It’s rather more green.’

Abigail is unappreciative of the humour.

Hannibal finds it amusing that she is clearly more upset about the knife than she is about Cassie Boyle. It is the more practical issue, and she is a thoroughly practical person; it will serve her well.

‘Perhaps a different question, then.’ He adjusts the shape of the last gnocchi she produced, sticky and warmed from a too-tight hold. ‘How does it make you feel that I held onto the knife?’

Abigail purses her lips. ‘Cheated,’ she says. ‘Unsafe.’

‘We have established that your secrets are safe with me. Just as mine are with you.’

‘Yeah,’ she huffs. ‘But that only works if I have one thing on you for each one thing you have on me. The knife upends the balance. I’ve got my word against yours, which aren’t good odds if Jack Crawford’s the one listening, and you’ve got a murder weapon covered with my fingerprints.’

‘These are a little too bulky.’ Hannibal indicates the gnocchi. ‘We need them the same size or we risk overcooking the smaller ones.’

Abigail obediently sprinkles a little more flour on her hands to adjust. She has pulled her hair back to cook, and the scar on her neck is left bare and obvious. Hannibal thinks she looks more like herself this way.

‘If you feel the balance has been disrupted,’ he says, ‘then perhaps you should do something about it.’

‘What am *I* supposed to do?’

‘Reclaim your power: it seems we keep coming back to that.’

Abigail looks at him quizzically. ‘I don’t think I have any power to reclaim,’ she says slowly. ‘Or at least I can’t see it.’

‘Today, maybe. But there is always tomorrow. Often the things that seem useless today can be repurposed come morning; I’m afraid that is the only advice I can offer for the moment.’

Abigail says nothing more on the topic as they finish putting together the pasta, though it’s apparent she is thinking about it. Hannibal finds it precious. He holds the trump card after all —multiple trump cards, in fact—but he is curious what she might come up with.

He has just closed the oven door and is pulling off the mittens when she speaks again.

‘I could go to Will,’ she says.

That takes him by surprise.

He turns slowly to face her, angling his head as he considers her expression: mutiny and only a shade of fear.

‘I could tell him everything I know,’ she continues, bolstering herself as she goes, audibly struggling to keep her voice from hitting a higher note. ‘About Randall Tier and Nick Boyle. About the Copycat Killer. Will isn’t Jack Crawford, so I don’t need evidence. I just need to tell him.’

‘You would be putting his life at risk,’ Hannibal points out, though that is almost certainly a lie. He hopes he is hiding it well: the audacity of her, the sudden sense of *threat,* they are tipping him off-balance.

‘Yes, well.’ She meets his eye; her hands are shaking. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time I got someone killed by proxy.’

Hannibal’s lips tug up. ‘That is true.’

‘I don’t want to do it,’ she adds unnecessarily.

‘No. You’re holding the card. Hopefully, you’ll never need to play it.’

He doesn’t think she’s breathing, but neither does she break eye contact.

‘A dangerous move.’ He wipes the counter clean, catching the stray flakes of flour into his hand. ‘Randall made one quite similar.’

The last of the blood drains from Abigail’s face. She doesn’t know, of course, that Hannibal never killed Randall for it—it was the Other Will who felt offended, and though the Other Will remains an enigma, Hannibal can’t imagine he’d begrudge Abigail revealing Hannibal’s misdeeds to anyone, let alone his twin.

‘Quite daring, Abigail,’ he praises at last, too impressed not to. ‘Quite clever, too.’

That makes her look away. Her face doesn’t relax, but her mouth quirks into a smile.

‘Thank you,’ she chirps as she gives a quick curtsey, making him laugh.

He gets back to Wolf Trap quarter to four, as promised. He finds Will in the kitchen unpacking.

‘Beverly brought groceries?’

‘Yep. And don’t ask. I don’t want to talk about it.’

Hannibal sidles closer. He lays his hands over Will’s stomach, taking stock of every organ. He doesn’t get knocked away, so at least there’s that. ‘We are agreed then.’

‘How do you make your fancy toast again?’

The bag Will's handling produces a loaf of factory-issued white toast bread wrapped in foil. It's not open yet, but Hannibal can already smell the artificial flavouring.

'I'll show you.'

Will relinquishes the atrocity, which Hannibal promptly drops into the bin.

'Hey!'

'We are now free to use bread made of flour and yeast, not plastic.'

Will seems undecided whether to snort or deride, and in the end does neither. There is a spark of something Hannibal cannot put his finger on, right there in the back of his eyes, and he regards Hannibal as though he has something to say, only never says it.

'Is everything alright, Will?'

Will shakes it off, the spark and the unspoken words, with a shrug that's off-angle and odd, and with a sniff that's meant to bury.

'I don't know,' he says. 'Is it?'

Hannibal doesn't understand the question: he can hardly supply an answer.

That is how things are, these days. Will *is* alright, when he wakes in Hannibal's arms and when he rubs sleep out his eyes over breakfast. He offers his opinion on the placement of their summer garden and smiles when they push wooden posts into the earth. He laughs when Hannibal clutches his knuckles white on the edges of his seat every time Will takes a too-confident turn—the car battery did awake miraculously one morning and Will has since revealed himself a high-risk driver. He still eats and he still wants Hannibal at night, and sometimes Hannibal almost forgets that they're slipping: but they *are* slipping.

Will sleeps in a little longer one morning and won't be nudged awake with promises of his favourite foods. He takes to napping again, daily, even as his exercise dwindles—forest hikes entrance him no more, the porch never gets its new coating of paint, the trip into town he's promised Hannibal never happens. Hannibal is sure no one else notices. Will puts on a smile for Abigail and Alana and Beverly are infrequent guests, but he is sure at least the dogs share his view: they gather around Will and offer their snouts with whines and huffs more often, now, than they ask to be played with.

'Will,' Hannibal says that night, hours after they've gone to bed.

Will doesn't answer, but his chin draws up, digging into Hannibal's collarbone. He's buried half-under him, limp and loose. Hannibal feels his lashes brush over skin as he blinks aware.

'Are you having trouble sleeping?' Hannibal asks.

'I don't know, are you?'

'Yes.'

Will weighs the statement.

Hannibal swallows. ‘Is it—’

‘It’s not Randall Tier,’ he cuts him off. ‘I told you I’m not talking about that.’

‘What are you thinking then?’ Hannibal smooths over his hair, kissing where he smells most like himself. ‘What do you see when you close your eyes?’

Will grunts a little as he rolls onto his back. He spends a moment gazing at the ceiling, eyes limpid, then flutters them close, as though to double-check before giving Hannibal his answer.

‘I see myself,’ he says. ‘Only it’s not me at all.’

‘Who is it?’

‘No one. It’s a land. A plane. Good grass, the sort that’ll keep over winter. A river.’

‘It sounds like a pleasant place for a walk.’

Will chuckles. ‘Yeah. And then there are the cracks.’

‘In the land?’

‘They run deep, like caverns. You can’t see them at first, they’re buried under the grass. If you don’t know where they are, there’s no way you’ll be able to make it long. You’ll fall right in.’

‘What’s on the bottom?’

Will sighs. ‘Nothing, Hannibal. There isn’t anything. That’s what voids are.’

‘Do *you* know where the caverns lie?’

‘Yeah.’

Hannibal smiles. ‘Then you could take my hand and grant me safe passage.’

Will’s lip twitches. He squeezes his eyes just a little tighter. ‘Very cute. But you don’t go strolling ‘round a place so veined with potholes it’s less apple and more worm.’

‘Worms are a fine source of protein,’ Hannibal points out. ‘They make the apple more nutritious.’

‘A fan of worms, are you. That what you see when you close your eyes?’

‘Only your worms.’

‘It’s late and you’re talking nonsense.’

His hand comes up to force Hannibal's eyes shut. In the darkness, Hannibal does see the afterimage of worms, etched into his mind to illustrate the conversation, but when this dissipates, he sees a shadow, and then he sees his face.

Perhaps it isn't so much that Will is growing fainter, but that Hannibal is paying him less attention. There's a chasm, growing by the day, between what Hannibal sees when his eyes are open and when his eyes are closed; and Will doesn't feel like Will anymore when he fails to occupy Hannibal's every breathing moment.

The morning after, Will has the long gaze that means he's watching a thing that unfolds beyond what Hannibal can see. He ignores offers of walks and sex. Hannibal promises not to take too long, slides into Will's jacket—better for forest excursions, and it carries his smell—and kisses him goodbye, tasting cold.

His Will is supposed to feel warm to the touch. It's the Other who dwells in a perpetual freeze; with these walks, has Hannibal been stealing that warmth away, crumbling it across winding paths to make sure he can be followed?

He waits until he's a good distance from the house before he takes out his phone. He considers asking, *would you be warm if I touched you?* But as fun as it is to push, Hannibal does have a degree of common sense.

Hello, Will, he writes instead.

The answer is a single question mark—discourteous and indifferent on the surface, but too prompt to fool him.

He's been thinking on a new topic to introduce today, so it takes him little time to formulate the successive question.

What does killing feel like to you?

A beat.

Jesus. It's nine in the morning

A smile stretches Hannibal's lips, painful as it digs into his left cheek. *Does it feel different depending on the time of day?*

Don't know. Haven't done it enough to run a comprehensive study. Does it?

Yes, Hannibal writes, *but I wouldn't want to interfere with future results by telling you how.*

Your first

Yes?

How did you kill your first?

Don't you know, Hannibal thinks fondly. Don't you know, sweetheart, when you were there?

But maybe he wants to hear it. Or maybe this Will lives in the present only, and it's his Will back home who holds their stories, a bruising vessel for a past he doesn't own.

I killed my first for revenge. Like you.

He feels the tension, like a spasm of static up his throat.

What makes you think Sutcliffe was my first?

It was horribly done, Hannibal replies. *Experienced killers bring a certain flair to their work that amateurs lack.*

On the backdrop of Hannibal's eyelids, painted yellow and red with each stroke of sun, the following occurs: the Other Will's face darkens, the blush an angry cardinal that teases at his ears and spills down the neck. He is annoyed and he is chastised, bashful and proud all at once. Then, Hannibal steps in close and drinks the blush like wine—drinks until all the blood is gone and the Other Will crumples under his touch.

That is not what happens when he opens his eyes, of course, though he refuses to believe this is due to a fault of the imagination. The issue at hand is that the Other Will is not *here:* he has time and space to censor and adjust his messaging, to hide reactions that Hannibal would surely wring from him otherwise.

He wasn't the first man I killed, comes the answer. *I just never learn.*

Frustration rises in Hannibal, sweet and burning. The tease is put-upon and coy and entirely manufactured: it is not what he wants because it is not real. He wants to tell him off for hiding. He wants to tell him to stop playing, but then he *is* charming when he plays.

Before he has the chance to do much else than bite into his lip for a hint of relief, the phone buzzes again.

Why did you kill your second?

Hannibal does a headcount of the dogs before he answers. A dream from months away lingers on the frays of his mind. When the hunter who found him kneeling over Norkus stitched Hannibal up, palms warm on textured skin, musky smell of winter sweat trapped beneath a down jacket—whose face was it, laid over the insignificance of his features? Was it his Will: careful with him? Was it the Other: drinking in his weakness?

Self-preservation. He saw too much of me and purported to understand what I'd done.

And that gets you killed

Sometimes.

I got to be careful then

You have little to fear. He says 'little,' not 'nothing,' because he doesn't wish to deceive him. *After all, you never see me.*

He doesn't realise that he sounds petulant until he's thumbed the send button, and it's too late.

To make up for it, he pockets the phone and walks on a while, ignoring the buzz of the answer. He throws Chip a stick and he picks up an early black morel sheltered under a fallen tree. His Will would never be fooled by the feigned lapse in attention, but he thinks this Will might.

When he does read the reply—a good four minutes after it was delivered—he is gratified to have waited this long.

Do you want to see me?

It's a genuine question, and Hannibal's silence will have exacerbated every doubt.

I see you every time I close my eyes, he tells him, because that is all he is ready to admit for now. *What do you see when you close your eyes?*

I don't see anything, the Other Will says. *That's the point*

The phantasmagorical imagination, then, belongs to Hannibal's Will as well. He revels in documenting these divisions of labour: they each prove to him that he was correct in identifying his Will as hollow and correct in wanting him to be real regardless.

You don't need to think your fantasia, he tells the Other Will. *You live them.*

You're living your fantasia too. Haven't we established that?

Hannibal tries to imagine what Will might be up to, back home. He never seems to have done very much when Hannibal arrives from time spent apart: he finds him curled up in bed or in a chair, blinking up confusedly as though woken from the slumber of winter. He has once imagined the Other Will might be losing out on existence when Hannibal wasn't spurring him into it; he now wonders if the same fate befalls his Will whenever Hannibal abandons him.

Will is hardly fantasia.

He can't possibly hear the scoff, but it makes the hairs stand on the back of his neck in either case. *Really? He feel real to you?*

He does, sometimes, when Hannibal runs his hands over his sides at night, feeding on the rise and fall of his breath. Other times, he feels only like something Hannibal could never have the way he was meant to be had.

He doesn't wish to lie, so he says nothing. A minute ticks by, and another. Betty nudges at him, then trots in the direction of the house and peers pointedly back: she prefers her walks not exceed the half-hour mark.

His phone buzzes.

You're a fool. The words are bleeding venom. *Worse than that, you're pathetic. You kill Will Graham. You carve out of his carcass raw material and you mould it into the little apple in your eye, a toy to have and hold and bend. You pull out a dollhouse and get to play family with it, round and round. Safe from the FBI, safe from Will Graham, safe from me. It's all easy. And then you go and fall for the scrapings on the bottom of the bucket.*

It's a new kind of outrage, cinching deep in the lungs, when the Other Will derides not just his reflection, but himself.

His earlier scorn toward Hannibal's Will stands in new light now, sharper and sweeter. Envy peels off the Other Will in thick stripes of raw skin; it's a wonder he's not shrieking with the pain, standing so bare to the unforgiving wind.

If it were Hannibal's Will on the other end of this line, Hannibal would rush in and wrap him in the most delicate of silks to shield the shorn flesh. He would soothe his bristles with a thousand murmurs of devotion, and he would explain that he was one part of a whole, that he'd been torn perfectly in half and that it's the frayed edges at the line of separation that are driving him to this insecurity, surely, because how else could he doubt?

But the Other Will despises it when Hannibal talks of them as the twin halves of Will Graham; hates the implication that through a joining, Hannibal believes he can enact resurrection. And if the Other Will doesn't trust Hannibal's fealty, then silks and words will not suffice: Hannibal must go and pare him a new suit of human skin.

That will necessitate a period of preparation, though, and saying anything now would only spoil the surprise. He puts the phone away without answering and whistles for the dogs.

The matter of *how* presents little issue: he has a dozen ideas already, percolating ever since he's had to hang up this particular hat to dedicate himself to Will's care. More importantly, he now has a compelling muse, and then Easter is coming: a time so ripe with symbolism, it is impossible to entertain the idea he might run short on inspiration. The matter of *who* is more pressing: he ponders it through the next couple of days, which are idle enough to make room for bouts of inspiration. He tries to curtail the line of thought when he's with Will, lest he see through his skull and be able to tell of its goings-on, but largely he believes this is a futile worry: Will's eyes are dulled, glazing over Hannibal's form even as he tries to smile like nothing is wrong.

Doctor Nader suggests consulting a psychiatrist. Hannibal offers to write Will a prescription for antidepressants, hoping for a swell of rebellion, but is met only with tepid indifference, which is what finally convinces him to engage a third party. If there is a cure for Will's ailment that does not require Hannibal severing his line of communication with the Other Will, Hannibal will find it.

That is how, when he is meant to be hunting for a victim, he finds himself driving Will to Baltimore instead, where he has arranged for him a session with Dr Du Maurier.

Bedelia is the obvious candidate for the task at hand: she is a highly skilled professional, she has worked with brain trauma before, she is stranger enough to assure Will of a degree of

privacy, and with a little prompting she is wont to relate to Hannibal exactly what was discussed.

She is also understandably unhappy with this arrangement. But enough has passed between them that it would be most discourteous of her to refuse such a simple favour.

‘I don’t understand why I have to see this person.’ Will’s head thumps against the side window. He’s put on his best face of utter disgruntlement and pushed on the glasses that he rarely wears these days. He looks like Professor Graham today, worn out from a night of horrors and unenthusiastic about the papers he must grade. Hannibal no longer wastes much time yearning for Wills of the past—he has decidedly enough Wills at present to occupy his day—but he does find it rather charming.

‘We’ve agreed that you’ve been a little blue.’

‘I already said I’d take your happy pills.’

‘And you already said you’d see Doctor Du Maurier. We’ve got nearly an hour until we get there—go to sleep if you’re going to be difficult for the sake of it.’

‘I am apparently depressed,’ Will complains, ‘and I am *definitely* brain-damaged. You’re not allowed to be mean to me.’

Hannibal kisses his hand twice to shut him up. The third time he does it, Will closes his eyes and relaxes against the headrest. The road is too busy for Hannibal to do more than glance over, but by now he knows what Will looks like as he drifts in the passenger seat, so he imagines in the gaps.

Bedelia appears perfectly composed when she opens the door and invites them in, but Hannibal can see plainly the tremor tucked under the tight skin of her face: anticipation mixed in with wariness.

She takes the meeting in her home, which surprises him—though she no longer has an office, he imagined she would have wanted to preserve a veneer of professionalism by renting one for the occasion. She’s giving a lot away by not doing so: the oddity of the situation, the closeness of their relationship, the fact that Will is only here through the potency of Hannibal’s hold on her.

He isn’t invited to wait in another room, so he stays long enough to make sure Will doesn’t get agitated over the novelty of the place, then takes a stroll. They’re in a residential area of Baltimore, the houses all sharp corners and marble fittings, glamour concealed beneath simplicity. Will isn’t a fan of the architecture, he made that quite clear when he scoffed at the first sight of it; *I’d rather your gaudy gothic nightmare,* he said. Hannibal pointed out that his gaudy gothic nightmare at least didn’t have paint peeling off the porch.

The thought of houses stirs something in Hannibal, buried until recently under the clutter of things more pressing. The porch is one thing, but then there is the kitchen—it’s severely cramped, and though Hannibal doesn’t hold out hope that Will would agree to knocking down a wall and cutting into the study area, he might at least be talked into a remodel. If the

fridge were moved from where it's always in the way, and a dishwasher were fitted where the dogs' water bowls are—they already have those in the lounge, Hannibal refuses to believe they're incapable of walking the few extra feet—

Will may be chronically resistant to change, but change *is* coming: Hannibal can feel it deep in his stomach like a hunger. He stands now between the two of them, one Will framing each side, and the needs and promises of each tug him every which way. The balance of this life is precarious—eventually, they're all going to fall off the edge. Hannibal can only hope they don't go careening down one of the cracks in Will's mind.

Well. Even if they do, that is one conclusion to the whole affair, he supposes, and there is little helping it in any case. The notion of untangling himself, so compelling half a year ago, strikes him as laughable now.

And if they do not end up trapped forever in the void of Will's mind, Hannibal is getting a proper kitchen.

He reaches a square of green, a sorry installation that feels forced and untended, and steps into the shade of the magnolia to alleviate the burn on the tip of his head. When he closes his eyes against the sun, he sees the kitchen that could be: fine-quality wood, spacious cupboards for storage, Will brewing his morning coffee in a new press, a filigree thing with gilded edges. The Other Will is peering through the window, unseen but felt. Hannibal isn't sure where else to put him; he hardly belongs in the light.

His phone buzzes.

Hannibal grins: a summoning.

The third person you killed

Hannibal thought that conversation had been concluded; he's unsure what number the Other Will is committed to reaching, but if he pushes on, things will start getting muddy. After the fourth or fifth victim, Hannibal has to admit he rather lost track.

An exploration of my new independence. I was nineteen and living on my own for the first time in my life. He hesitates, wanting to tell him about the landscapes that the Florentine sun would paint on his eyelids. But for as long as he waited on the bench by his gelateria, the Other Will never manifested to him in Italy, and doesn't deserve to hear about it. *I told time by the full moons and savoured my first taste of the loneliness of adulthood.*

Depressed teen with no friends in the city kills a man for the drama

Hannibal doesn't appreciate the comment, but he's not about to let it show that he's affected by brute jest. *Prosaic but accurate,* he writes, like the bigger man.

Did it feel different to the others?

He peers into the well to search for the memory and finds he doesn't have to look deep. It's a wink of sunlight on the surface of the water, easy and playful.

Yes, he tells him. *It felt better.*

Because you were in control

An immediate diagnosis. Hannibal wants to go into the forest right now and find him: turn back the clock until they're in the midst of winter, until he can spot his footsteps in the pillows of snow and stalk him right back to his hole, and yank him out of there by the hair on his neck.

Yes.

Enough. He needs to get back.

As soon as he gives the front door a ring, it blows open. Will is apparently very ready to go.

'I thought we might stay a moment,' Hannibal says gently, eyeing with apprehension the hands fisted so tightly in Will's pockets he must be driving the nails in until it burns, 'and discuss—'

'You can stay all you like. I'm waiting in the car.'

Bedelia stands by, unperturbed by the urgency in Will's voice. Either she has glimpsed enough of his psychological make-up during this single session to anticipate a storming-out, or he'd been rude long before Hannibal showed up to fetch him. He purses his lips to hold in censure.

When he extends the car keys, Will snatches them out of his hand so jerkily that the edge leaves a pale line on Hannibal's skin. In the next second, it swells with blood.

He places the hand behind his back, hiding the evidence of it.

'Thank you for coming, Will,' Bedelia says smoothly.

Will ignores her completely, turning to Hannibal. 'If you take too long, I'm driving off without you.'

'I thought I could stay all I liked.'

'You *can.* You might not have a car anymore if you do.'

Will is a ball of fury, knotted so tight he's swallowed his own fuse, so it's all the odder when he hesitates on the final step down, then turns and catches Hannibal's mouth in a kiss.

It is a good thing Hannibal's body has been conditioned into a ready response to Will's affections. By the time he realizes what is happening, he is already clutching at his lapels, helpless against months of training. He has never been kissed this way in plain daylight, in front of an audience, not by Will, though even the memories of others staking their claims erode and fray at the edges the longer Will keeps him flush against his chest. When he releases him at last, his mouth is red and his eyes are steel. Hannibal seriously considers

succumbing to gravity, slipping from the steps and trailing Will to the car like he so manifestly wants him to. But he refuses to be played quite so easily.

‘I’ll join you shortly,’ he says, not sounding nearly as breathless as he feels.

Will says nothing, though his glare speaks volumes. It galls Hannibal to bring the expression to his face. Teasing the Other Will into flares of anger is remarkably entertaining, but doing the same to his Will feels brutal.

He follows Bedelia into the kitchen, where she promptly produces a bottle of wine and pours herself a swelled glass.

‘I apologize for Will’s poor behaviour at the door,’ Hannibal tells her. ‘I remain grateful you’ve agreed to see him.’

She takes a long sip of the wine before she answers, her throat bobbing painfully as she forces it down. ‘You’ve put me in an impossible situation, Hannibal. Though you have been taking an extremely lax approach to our commitment over the past few months, you remain my patient and I your therapist. Morally and practically, I am unqualified to work with Will Graham.’

‘Will’s issues stem from his illness. Encephalitis survivors are prone to mental disorders, depression among them—our relationship in this case is irrelevant.’

Bedelia gives a chuckle. It smells of Moscato grapes.

‘If it is irrelevant,’ she says, bitter and amused all at once, ‘then I suggest next time you explain this to Will in advance. It might save me fending questions about you for the full hour.’

That gives Hannibal pause. He angles his head to the side, searching her for hints of exaggeration or even direct deception. ‘Will asked about me?’

‘*Will* refused to talk about very much besides.’

‘What did you tell him?’

Bedelia considers her answer. ‘Nothing that would seriously breach patient confidentiality. But that involved a lot of manoeuvring.’

Hannibal tries to think of what Will might have asked and comes up short. Will so rarely asks him anything: yes, they talk about insignificant topics, and yes, he often wants to know what Hannibal’s making for dinner, but he displays very little interest in digging under Hannibal’s platitudes and white lies.

‘Have you considered he might only have agreed to come because I am, in theory if not in practice, *your* therapist?’

It has crossed Hannibal’s mind, though if anything, he imagined Will would have wanted an opportunity to irritate, not investigate.

‘You have yet to tell me what he asked.’ It seems inconceivable that Will would *suspect* anything—there are so many things he still doesn’t know about Hannibal, he could have been perfectly innocent in his curiosity—but if he does, then Hannibal needs a plan; he needs a strategy; he needs to decide whether he is more afraid of him finding out, or more exalted that he might ever want to.

But whether fear or hope, Bedelia’s next words pierce right through the feeling.

‘He asked what any lover would ask,’ she says, translating a shrug into the cadence of her sigh, ‘if the lover in question had no notion of boundaries. Past relationships, current preoccupations, what you say about him in therapy. It would be amusing if it weren’t so insulting: to be relegated to the role of informant.’

Hannibal can’t tell if she’s being truthful—her eyes are diverted, her features tight—but for the moment he is finding all this quite funny, and willing to postpone deeper reflection. ‘I asked a similar favour of you,’ he observes.

‘We have history.’ Her voice clips. ‘You could reasonably expect me to bend the rules for you. Will Graham apparently assumed me so unprincipled that I’d do the same for him without additional incentive.’

It sounds strange to hear her say his full name, just like she used to say it before Will Graham split in two. Hannibal quenches the instinct to correct her.

‘Will is a highly intuitive person,’ he says. ‘He must have seen something in you that drove him to this belief.’

‘I suppose he is intuitive. He is also brazen, arrogant, *shameless*.’ Bedelia’s eyes narrow into perfect slits. ‘I was surprised when he first caught you in his net, Hannibal, but I am surprised no more.’

Heat erupts in Hannibal’s lungs, sweet and potent.

As though his counterweight, Bedelia deflates. ‘Put him on antidepressants and something for anxiety.’ She chucks down the rest of her glass. ‘I can write him a prescription if you’d like at least a pretence of doing this right. I can’t help him beyond that if he doesn’t want to be helped.’

‘I could talk to him,’ Hannibal offers. He would very much like for the two of them to come together again if it means hearing more of these observations from Bedelia’s mouth. ‘I believe I can convince him to adjust his attitude.’

‘Save your breath,’ Bedelia laughs. ‘I cannot help him, and I’m not entirely sure I can help you either, Hannibal.’

She has never suggested such a thing before; it stings to hear it. But Will would rattle the most self-composed woman, and she *is* the most self-composed woman that Hannibal knows: he has every faith she will get over this upset.

In either case, he has little time right now for therapy.

Will is waiting for him in the passenger's seat. When he sees him approach, he unlocks the doors. Hannibal did not genuinely believe his threat to drive away, but he still welcomes the pleasure of being proven right.

'Ready to go?' he asks mildly as he slips inside.

'I don't know, are we? Or do you need more time gossiping about me?'

Hannibal starts the engine. 'We are quite done, thank you.'

A smile tugs at Will's lips. He doesn't appear bothered: he must have both expected this and resolved he didn't care. Since that appears to be the case, Hannibal gives up playing appearances.

'If you'd like to know the details of my romantic history,' he says, 'you are free to ask.'

Will huffs his scepticism. 'Doesn't seem fair when I can't give you mine.'

'You are in a unique position where you can honestly say you have no fond memories of any partners before me. I can't imagine you think I find that displeasing.'

'No. But *I* find it displeasing.'

'Of course.'

For a while, Hannibal focuses on driving, giving Will time to sample his grief. Then, he prods, 'Do you truly not remember any previous relationships? You've regained some of your memories, have you not?'

Will winces. 'Stop talking like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like *her*.'

Hannibal falls silent for a moment, adjusting. He loosens the muscles on his face and he listens in to the cadence of Will's breath.

'You told me you'd regained some of your memories,' he tries again. His accent feels rougher around the edges in a way he never realized. 'But you don't remember anything of previous relationships?'

'I remember. I just can't trust which memories are real.'

Will doesn't comment on the code switch, but he is no longer radiating displeasure, only run-of-the-mill defensiveness.

'I'd be just as interested to hear about any manufactured relationships,' Hannibal says.

‘I’m sure you would.’

No confessions are forthcoming, so Hannibal decides to drop the line of inquiry for now.

‘I’ll also point out that your exit performance was unnecessary. Doctor Du Maurier and I have never been more than colleagues.’

Will faces away from him, a failed attempt to hide his blush. ‘Maybe I just wanted to kiss you.’

‘You aimed to cause offense.’

‘I’m pretty sure I aimed to kiss you.’

‘It’s possible to kiss me and still maintain some manners.’

Will’s face changes with each reply he considers. He settles on,

‘And what if I don’t? Maintain manners?’

A challenge. It’s really quite predictable. Hannibal is so used to defusing him, he doesn’t see what it is that Will is trying to achieve: he should know the outcome of this gamble by now.

‘Then I suppose I’ll have to keep you home until I’ve taught you how to behave,’ he says lightly.

The effect of it is immediate: Will’s shoulders sag and his fingers uncurl, and though he fights to keep the frown on his face, a smile bleeds through the creases.

‘Well, that sounds like a recipe for frustration,’ he decides. ‘Like the—the—fuck. Guy, rock, human condition.’

‘Sisyphus. But his was a monotonous task. *I* am going to enjoy myself every step of the way.’

Will spends that afternoon hankering for his attention, set on proving himself Sisyphus’s rock after all. It is impossible to dedicate a sliver of a second to thinking about the Other Will and what sort of gift he might prefer.

It’s at his practice that he must finally seek respite if he wants to get any planning done at all. He is doing just that during his session with Franklyn that Thursday, thumbing at the sharp edge of his pen like he’s testing a blade.

Franklyn is blushed red up to the hairline today, obsessively adjusting the collar of his new shirt, unused to the stiff starch of it—it’s a nice enough shirt, Hannibal decides. He considers complimenting him on the selection, but while praise may serve to temporarily balloon his thimble of a self-esteem, it will do nothing to deflate his obvious anxiety.

‘You seem upset today,’ he observes, cutting short Franklyn’s terse silence—so unlike him. ‘I can’t help but think something must have happened.’

‘I don’t know if anything happened,’ Franklyn exhales. ‘That’s part of the problem.’

Hannibal doesn’t repeat the question. These things are best waited out. He thinks instead about his Rolodex, gathering dust. Who among its registry would please the Other Will best? Who would anger him bright and burning?

‘My friend Tobias,’ Franklyn says finally, like he’s giving up something dear to him but seeing no way around it. ‘You met him at the gallery.’

‘I remember.’

‘Did you—I mean, I guess you can’t tell things like that just from meeting a person. There’s no such thing as psychiatrist super-vision.’

Hannibal tips his head. ‘What did you suppose I saw?’

Franklyn’s hands rub at the armrests, snatching at the upholstery. ‘I don’t know. Something dark? Twisted? God, I know how this sounds.’

‘How does it sound?’

‘It sounds paranoid!’

‘You are sensing a darkness in your friend that you haven’t seen before. There’s a darkness in us all, Franklyn. It doesn’t strike me as paranoid.’

‘I *have* seen it before.’ Franklyn scrunches his face, then gives the armrest a little thump. He’s being entirely too liberal with the furniture today. Perhaps the Other Will might appreciate *this* gift? ‘But I thought he was mysterious. You know? I thought, this is a guy with a dark secret. I didn’t want to know the secret, I didn’t think about what it was—I just liked that he *had* it. But if I had to guess, I’d have said he, I don’t know, he’s got some weird fetish. Not—’

He breaks, his breath a wheeze. His eyes are dry, but Hannibal passes him a tissue anyway: hopefully he’ll fondle that instead of the chair.

‘I came over to his shop the other day.’ He stuffs the tissue into a ball, then begins tearing at the edges. ‘I thought I’d take him to lunch. I had to wait for him to finish a lesson—he teaches cello. It’s a beautiful sound, the cello, isn’t it? It sounds so mournful. I asked him if he’d teach me, but he says I’m too tone-deaf to learn.’

Franklyn chuckles. A strip off the tissue flutters to the floor, creasing Hannibal’s eyebrow.

‘I was waiting at the front near the counter, and then I opened this drawer because I had a papercut that kept opening back up and I thought maybe he’s got some band-aids in there, or at least a Kleenex. He didn’t. He had *a gun.*’

‘How did seeing it make you feel?’

‘Freaked out! Obviously! I asked him, what do you need a gun for? He said he needed it for protection. Protection from what? Who’s breaking into a cello shop to rob him at gunpoint? And the drawer was unlocked—what if one of his students found it? He teaches kids, for god’s sake!’

‘It does sound rather irresponsible.’

‘Yeah!’ Franklyn calms a little. ‘He took me downstairs after, to his workshop. He showed me how he makes strings from horse gut. He told me the way he’s doing it is so unique, he has to keep it secret, that people might want to come in and steal away this secret method. I don’t know enough about it to judge. Maybe it is special. But special enough that he’s worried he’ll get killed over it?’

The man Hannibal remembers from their chance meeting at the gallery strikes him as incapable of worry. Fear, perhaps, could take residence over his features, or anticipation. ‘Did he seem worried?’ he asks.

Franklyn gives a half-smile. ‘No. No, he seemed delighted.’

‘If you read him correctly, then that is certainly odd,’ Hannibal acquiesces, ‘but if anything, it sounds to me like Tobias is the one suffering from paranoia.’

‘I tried to talk him down. I told him it must be lonely, feeling this way,’ Franklyn continues, almost as though Hannibal hasn’t spoken. ‘You have a dangerous secret no one can know. He said yes. He said he was lonely. Which—I mean, I’m his closest friend. I’m there *always*. I —’

‘You feel underappreciated.’

‘It doesn’t matter what I feel! It matters that I told him to share the secret with me, tell me how he makes these strings—I mean, who am I gonna tell? I probably won’t even understand it! And he says: it would break you. He says it like he pities me. Like I could never—’

The last of the tissue lands at his feet. Hannibal swallows around a weight in his mouth, pressing down on the tongue.

‘It really doesn’t sound like he’s talking about cellos, does it?’ Franklyn jokes wetly.

Hannibal smiles, mellowed. ‘It does not.’

‘What—what do you think I should do?’

‘I am not Tobias’s psychiatrist, Franklyn. I am yours.’

‘Right, I know that, but—’

‘It sounds to me like Tobias might be grappling with his own issues, but I cannot diagnose him based on a telephone game. What I am concerned about are your feelings of inadequacy, and whether your friendship with Tobias is exacerbating them.’

‘You’re saying, what, that he’s toxic? That I should stop seeing him?’

‘It’s too early to conclude anything like it, but it is certainly on the table.’

‘I can’t,’ he doesn’t speak, he *pleads.* ‘I can’t leave him. If I leave him, I’m alone.’

A thought changes his features. For a moment, it captivates Hannibal entirely: he forgets his Rolodex, his two Wills, the morsels of tissue on the floor.

‘If I leave him, I’m alone,’ Franklyn repeats, voice dark with realization. ‘I think he likes that.’

His gaze meets Hannibal’s head-on, and though he knows Franklyn is only seeing himself reflected back, Hannibal feels *seen.* Together, voiceless because it is inconceivable to admit it aloud, they tumble headfirst into anagnorisis: *they* like it, too.

On his way home that day, Hannibal drops by Tobias’s shop.

Though he’s wearing muted browns and a looser shoulder, Tobias Budge is as tightly fitted into his suit today as he was at the opening. It is obvious he knows how to dress, but equally that the purpose of his fashion is not to broadcast but contain. He is trapped beneath the fabric. Perhaps he is trapped beneath his own skin, too.

‘Doctor Lecter,’ he greets, too even for surprise. ‘How pleasant to see you again. How can I help you today?’

Hannibal surveys the instruments laid out on the shelves. The air is a heady perfume of mahogany and beeswax.

‘I have an out-of-tune piano on my hands that desperately needs maintenance,’ he begins leisurely, sinking into the pleasure of the crisp sound of his soles on the polished floor. ‘Then I remembered Franklyn speaking highly of your mastery.’

A flash of a grin, the first genuine expression Hannibal has got out of him. It’s such a tepid compliment that he suspects either Tobias must be used to receiving scant praise, or, more likely, that nothing except praise moves him at all.

‘If anything, he speaks highly of *your* mastery,’ Tobias echoes sweetly. Hannibal affects pleasure, though he has minimal interest in his approval.

‘Unfortunately, my mastery in fine-tuning minds surpasses my mastery in fine-tuning instruments.’

‘Of course. I would be glad to help.’

‘Do you do house visits? We are quite a bit out of the way.’

‘It’s not a problem.’

Hannibal considers him. He does not strike him as a personality prone to paranoia. It is entirely possible Franklyn should be more trusting of his intuition; so far, Hannibal is ready to believe every word.

He jots down the Wolf Trap address on a proffered card, a thick grain that tickles at his fingertips. He does not mind the work he does with him, but Franklyn is hardly a fascinating study subject; this new development is a blessing fallen right into his lap and will be best explored when he is back on his own terrain.

'My partner isn't feeling well at the moment,' he adds as he slides the card over and pockets his pen. 'I don't want to disturb his rest. May I give you a call in a few weeks to set a date?'

'Of course you can, Doctor Lecter.'

It's the odd phrasing, and the lack of any customary expression of concern over Will's health, that makes Hannibal wonder if Tobias Budge might have glimpsed something about him, too, and is hinting at a desire to play open cards.

On his way back, he amuses himself with the thought of Franklyn, red-faced and shameful, confessing to Tobias that he senses a darkness in his psychiatrist.

Will greets him from the rocking chair Hannibal had bought for the porch. It's a similar model to the chair Will's black-and-white relative sat in, on her porch preserved in Will's photo albums, which is why Hannibal bought it. When he did, he showed Will the photo again and asked him for a name, but Will wasn't sure. He told him he remembered only the little porcelain figurines of toads that she had in her front room, and how he used to take them off the shelf to play with.

'How was your day?'

Will shrugs. He's avoiding his gaze in the way that means he's hoping Hannibal won't ask for specifics, because there aren't any.

'Have you given any more thought to the herb garden?'

'Didn't feel like staring at a screen today.'

'We can do some research together later tonight. I'm only asking if you've thought about it.'

'I didn't feel like *thinking* either.'

The hunt for hobbies has been exhausting. The garden, Hannibal refuses to let go of. It would make for a perfect pastime: it requires little manual precision, it is a good exercise in patience, it guarantees that Will gets his share of sunlight, and it appears, unrelenting, in every picture of future summers Hannibal paints in his mind.

If it ever comes to fruition, it must at least turn out better than this morning's attempt at a sketching lesson. Will listened to Hannibal talk about choosing the best pencil for the task for all of thirty seconds before deeming it so desperately dull that he was willing to feign interest in sex to make it stop. Hannibal found this distasteful and left without kissing him goodbye.

Flirtatious talk is one thing, but Hannibal is well-aware that Will's libido has taken a blow in recent weeks. That Will would think Hannibal had any interest in taking a half-hearted partner—that Will would think he needed merely to climb into his lap to distract him—that Will refused to understand the choice of pencil was of key importance—

But that was this morning. He would rather pretend he doesn't remember it.

'Are you hungry?'

Will shrugs. Hannibal toes off his shoes and goes into the kitchen, the dogs trailing behind him like chicks after a mother hen.

He's stirring the risotto when Will joins him. In the harsher light of the kitchen bulb, the blue circles under his eyes seem to bleed dead colour down into the cheeks.

'I drew you a picture.'

Hannibal can't leave the risotto idle, so Will holds it up for him to see. It's one of Hannibal's sketchbooks: Will flicks through pages Hannibal has covered with delicate lines, framing Wolf Trap at dawn, Will relishing the high noon, the forest bleeding dusk.

Then, another page falls and the line changes: it's darkly confident, the angles rough, the colour a deep black smudge. He must have used the 12B Lumograph, which if he'd listened to Hannibal for more than thirty seconds he would know to avoid until he was more experienced. Hannibal is confident if he lifted Will's right hand up, he would find it brushed dark with carbon.

The drawing is of a sun, the kind a pre-schooler might add to a landscape, only its face is contorted in a frown, not a smile. It takes up barely a quarter of the page, resting at the very centre of the empty space.

'Why is the sun angry?' he asks.

'It's not angry, it's grumpy. It's artistic self-expression.'

'Ah. Yet still it shines. An interesting disparity. The technique is a little lacking, but the artist certainly has vision.'

Will chuckles into Hannibal's shoulder. 'I won't sign it,' he promises. 'If you ever need a crutch to launch your artistic career, you can appropriate it. I won't say a thing.'

'Thank you, Will.'

Will hums. Hannibal hears him close the sketchbook behind his back to protect it from any splatter from the pan. 'How was your day?' he asks.

Hannibal tells him about his session with Franklyn. He strongly believes in employing patient confidentiality where it suits him, but there is an opportunity here to compare his impression of Tobias with Will's. Also, Will asked.

‘I’m curious what you thought of Mr Budge,’ he finishes. Will has sunk down to the floor, Lana lain across his lap for pets, and he doesn’t look up from her when he considers.

‘You think Franklyn’s got a point.’

‘I do,’ Hannibal affirms, ‘but I was asking for your opinion.’

‘Barely remember the guy,’ Will shrugs. ‘But yeah. Franklyn needs to get the hell out of dodge.’

The days are getting longer, and even now dapples of tired sunlight brush over Will’s exposed neck. Hannibal grates some Grana Padano over the pan and begins folding it in.

‘I don’t think that is what Franklyn wants,’ he says.

‘Yeah, well, that’s fine. Then he’s gonna need to practice selective blindness, isn’t he?’

‘You don’t think he should try to find out the crux of the matter before he decides?’

‘No,’ Will’s voice is dark. ‘If he can’t handle it, then he can’t handle it. Worse things in the world than a bit of ignorance.’

The statement irks Hannibal throughout dinner, which is consequently a silent, heavy affair. He has expected to feel easy joy at seeing Will after a day apart, but his heart is stubbornly unmoved, weighing him down where he sits.

Since he can’t make himself touch Will, he spends a few minutes chasing Zoe around the house until she’s finally tucked into his elbow. He carries her into the study, where he sinks into an armchair and she stretches luxuriously in his lap.

He’s watching her eyes flitter shut with the hypnotising motion of his hand against the warmth of her belly, when Will calls out from upstairs.

There’s no urgency to his voice, so Hannibal takes his time setting Zoe down on her bed, flicking off lights and straightening abandoned books and slippers as he goes. Upstairs, the bathroom door stands ajar, golden light pouring onto the staircase. There’s the harsh sound of water drumming against the bottom of the tub.

‘Help me with the bath?’

Hannibal peers around the room, trying to determine what it is that Will might need help *with*. The tub is filling—he checks the temperature with his wrist and deems it acceptable—and Will’s towel hangs in its rightful place. Is he looking for the salts? The bergamot oil?

Amid Hannibal’s confusion stands Will, fully-dressed and expectant. He appears, somehow, more tired than he did even an hour prior. Has dinner exhausted him so? Has the digestion, stirring awake deep in his belly, siphoned all life from his body, and he’s worried he’ll collapse getting into the tub on his own?

Or perhaps this is a game. Yes—Will *would* play a game like that. They've played it before: the tease of fabric as it slides off his body, the coy looks, the orders delivered in a voice dripping honey. Feeling a little surer, he helps Will out of his shirt and hunches to remove his socks, but his hands on Will's cold skin detect no trace of shiver, and Will's fingers never find their way into Hannibal's hair to tug or stroke, only to keep his balance.

When Will slides into the tub, he's sliding in time, too, and pulling Hannibal with him. The months they've lived here together shimmer and fade: they are again new, careful, treading precarious ground. Will is again too weak to lift his arm properly so Hannibal may soap up under his armpits and he has to be taken by the wrists, ever so gently, and moved about so that nothing knocks against the unforgiving edge of the bath, so no sudden motion splatters soapy water into his eyes.

Will's eyes are idly open and follow Hannibal's motions, but there's a delay. It compels Hannibal to slow down, to take his time with every bit of skin. The towel he's placed on the tile to protect his knees releases a whisper of water as he shifts his weight. He cradles Will's head in his hand and eases it down into the water to wash his hair, and as he does so he murmurs at him to close his eyes. That is the only thing either of them says.

When Will's skin glistens clean and pink, and the pads on his fingers loosen into wrinkles, Hannibal helps him step out. His grasp on Hannibal's shoulder leaves behind a large dark stain that seeps only a momentary warmth before it cools sticky and unpleasant. He towels him off where he stands, then lays out a fresh towel on the wicker chair in the corner, lest the fibres prick the exposed skin on his buttocks.

He deliberates by the cabinet a while, eyes flicking over the selection of products. He used to rub medical-grade ointment into Will's flaking skin after each encounter with water, and the tube still sits at the back of the shelf, gathering dust. But it's been months since he stopped taking steroids and no longer requires anything near as potent. He selects instead a lighter goat milk lotion with a sweet honey scent, which melts right into Will's skin as he starts on his feet, digging the thumbs in deep where he knows Will likes it.

Will arches his foot and his back, neck straining a violent bow, a little sound of pleasure framing his lips. He's spent much of today sitting out on the porch, drinking in the sun—it didn't help his mood, but it did soak into his body, the shade of a tan dancing around his ankles. Hannibal's grumpy sun, he thinks, with a harrowing desperation he doesn't know where to put.

'Is there anything I can do?' he asks. The feeling doesn't show through his tone.

Will doesn't answer. Hannibal feels the burn of his gaze on the tip of his head, lowered as he massages the lotion into the dips of Will's knees.

'You spoke of ignorance today,' he continues at Will's silence, curling his toes to stave off emotion. 'I agree there are worse things than ignorance. But it's not conducive to intimacy.'

Will says nothing.

‘Are there things you’re not telling me,’ he half-asks, without the inflection of a question, ‘or are there things I’m not telling you?’

He thinks about Randall Tier. He thinks about all the questions about Randall Tier that Will never asked.

He thinks about the words, too. Every *mine,* every *love* and *forever,* that he’s only ever said in his mind.

‘There’s a reason we’re not telling them,’ Will croaks. He sounds on the verge of death; or maybe just on the verge of a crevice in his mind, about to lose his balance. ‘I’m fine not knowing the things you’re not telling me.’

And the moment he says it, Hannibal knows he is real.

He pretended to believe, but he never *quite* believed, though every doubt he sheltered from the Other Will’s cruel prodding. But the Other Will is wrong: this Will couldn’t have been created solely to act Hannibal’s fantasy.

Because if he were everything that Hannibal wanted, he would be *demanding* to know.

‘Some things need to be told.’ His finger strokes over Will’s thigh. There’s a mosquito bite there: the first of the year. ‘Eventually.’

When he looks up, he finds Will’s eyes too-deep and too-blank.

And then he is falling down and through, into the blue wells as they get deeper and darker—but he is falling alone. Will has nowhere left to go, Hannibal sees it now in the resignation etched into his face: he has already fallen through a crack in his mind and sits now at the bottom, as the void nibbles at his fraying edges, as he peers up for a glimpse of light.

‘Eventually,’ Will whispers. ‘But not yet.’

‘Not yet.’ Hannibal’s mouth is dry.

Will swallows. ‘A little longer.’ It’s an apology or a plea, or maybe a prayer. ‘Give me a little longer.’

Chapter End Notes

Oof, this was a long one!
Thank you so much for reading. I have been struggling with some good old writer's block and although it seems I have pushed through that now, I am a little more behind with the story than I intended to be at this stage. So, I will be taking a short break from posting after this chapter to catch up. Barring acts of curly-haired forest revenants, I will

be back with the next chapter in time for Christmas. I hope you'll find it worth the wait: shit is about to go down.

The Betrayal

Chapter Summary

After Easter Sunday passes without any resurrections, Hannibal decides to limit his interactions with the Other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighteen: The Betrayal.

The table sags heavy with the weight of their feast. There is baked ham and roasted goose, there is Pashka and there are poppyseed rolls, there are cheeses and the eggs they had dyed in onion skins and beetroot, to etch into the coating swirls and patterns—or, in Will's case, what Hannibal chooses to interpret a depiction of entropy incarnate.

'Are we expecting Christ's second coming today?'

Will, having showered and dressed for the occasion—dressed in a T-shirt and slacks, yes, but that is nevertheless an impressive effort for a morning and for Will's recent mood—emerges from the stairway. He takes in the table setting with a critical eye.

Hannibal isn't sure how Christ's second coming might be related to his choice in dishes for Easter breakfast, but he is positive he will soon find out.

'I assume he's coming straight to our house,' Will elaborates. 'Twelve apostles in tow.'

'And I'm sure they would make for delightful company, but Easter Sunday is traditionally reserved for family.'

'Do I have a dozen cousins I've forgotten?'

Hannibal ignores the teasing in favour of pulling out a chair for Will. Recent weeks have been grim and growing grimmer, with Will's energies steadily depleting and the antidepressants seemingly doing little to lift his melancholia. If Easter is a time of resurrection, Hannibal would like to harness the mythical potency of the occasion for one purpose exactly. He is disinterested in further pursuing the topic of Jesus Christ, even jokingly—what a waste of a second coming that would be.

'Beverly just called. She's going to drop in.'

Hannibal's hand tightens on his napkin. He is sure Beverly Katz is on a mission to get herself onto his plate.

Will's eyes are amused when they catch his reaction. 'She said she has something for you.'

'How kind of her.'

The sad truth is, Hannibal can hardly excuse killing Beverly Katz. She did after all call ahead and likely received Will's blessing for paying them a visit; more than that, extending a peace offering shows remarkable dedication to maintaining civility.

The need for such an offering transpired two days ago, when Hannibal had a free moment and decided to organize the desk in the study in case Will wanted to make use of it for his reading. The reading has become sparser lately. Hannibal understood that dedicating a space to the activity was unlikely to help Will come out of the fog, but it was preferable to doing nothing at all.

Though Hannibal would sit at the desk on occasion to work or sketch, he kept his tools on a dedicated shelf and rarely opened the heavy drawer concealed beneath the pulpit. Consequently, it was still full of Will Graham's belongings from another life: he found a broken pencil, a stack of ancient case files, a notebook filled with scribbled notes on anything from the dogs' diet to academic pursuits. Hannibal had seen these before, of course, when he first readied the house for Will's arrival back from hospital. He'd gone through most of Will's possessions then, each investigations a small reward for the completion of a chore, a nostalgic pleasure that charmed the days he'd spent here alone. Still, they were interesting relics worth preserving; Hannibal wondered if Will would allow him to organize at last the upstairs bedroom so he may find them a dedicated spot.

Under one such relic, Hannibal discovered a handful of bills that had not been there before.

He examined them, cycling through possible explanations but not yet concerned. He was unsure where Will would have got the cash unless he took it from Hannibal's wallet, so less worrying than the money's provenance was the reason for the placement. Still, Will's brain works in mysterious ways, and he is prone to whimsy.

He resolved to ask Will about it over dinner. He was unprepared for the blank stare he received when he did, Will's fork hanging halfway up to his mouth.

'It's—' Will searched for the answer in his memory, brow knitting in confusion. 'It was for a ride.'

'A ride?'

Will looked halfway to embarrassed. 'Beverly gave it to me. Ages ago now, I don't know.'

Outrage sizzled in Hannibal's chest. 'Beverly gave you money for a ride. Did she tell you to hide it?'

'It's hardly hidden,' Will sidestepped the question.

'I will leave it in its place then. Do you have a number for a taxi service?'

'Hannibal—'

Hannibal stood. He made his way to his coat, hanging off the hook by the door, and produced his wallet.

‘Here.’ He extended the card to Will. ‘This is my preferred service. They have a selection of unmarked cars to choose from. If you would like to ride the Bentley but would prefer another driver, I believe they have a similar model on offer.’

‘Seriously? You’re going to—it was months ago. I barely remember it.’

‘I will leave the card with the money, then. Please do let Ms Katz know that we can afford a taxi fare. I would hate for her to worry about this in future.’

He was not truly upset with Will. Clearly this subterfuge was the work of Beverly’s misguided ideas, set in place early enough into Will’s recovery that he would have been unable to comprehend it fully.

Hannibal can appreciate her wanting to make a gesture. He would only prefer she’d chosen a different day; he made the food for Will and no one else.

Beverly arrives with the rain. It is a spring shower, painting half-rainbows in the misty air and clearing the warmth of the day. Will stands out in it, one foot on the last porch step, face upturned to catch droplets on his eyelids.

‘Oh,’ Beverly says when she sees they are clearly in the middle of eating. ‘I didn’t mean to interrupt the festivities. I got you a chocolate bunny though.’

She did. The golden-wrapped bunny sports a delicate ribbon of an acclaimed chocolate maker, constituting another unfortunate argument against disposing of Ms Katz.

‘Thank you,’ Hannibal says, wondering if this is it and she might now go. He doesn’t have to wonder long.

‘I also thought maybe you’d be able to help me.’

From her rain-speckled leather bag, she produces a folder.

‘That’s your idea of a peace offering?’ Will is shaking water off his hair, expression somewhere between amusement and anxiety. ‘Jesus.’

‘Hey, watch your mouth. On a holy day, no less.’

‘Jack usually wants me for these things.’

‘I’m not here as Jack’s messenger. Look,’ she meets Hannibal’s eye. ‘The vic played the trombone at the Baltimore Philharmonic. It looks like our killer is a fan of classical music. I thought maybe you would have heard some gossip—it’s a leap, but we have few leads to go on.’

Hannibal has an inkling what this might be about. He takes the file.

The photographs show a man arranged elegantly centre-stage, knees pushed wide apart to make room for the neck of a cello thrust through his throat. The arrangement is pleasing to the eye, clean and well-considered; the macabre is constrained to the open throat, the man's suit is clean. His polished shoes reflect the light from the overhead rack. Either he'd been abducted directly after a performance, or the perpetrator took the time to dress him in style.

'His vocal cords are exposed,' Hannibal remarks. 'Was that purely aesthetic or a practical choice?'

'He played them, yeah. Not something you hear every day. Or maybe Spotify just doesn't think I'm punk enough. Do you recognize the victim?'

Hannibal shuffles the photographs to find a close-up. 'I'm afraid not.'

'Show me.'

Hannibal resists looking up at Will. Seeing his determination must not change Hannibal's mind.

Beverly doesn't know any better. 'Will, I don't know if—'

'He's not been to a society outing in months. If you don't want to have made the drive for nothing, you'll let me see the pictures.'

'I would hardly call this nothing, Will,' Hannibal counters. 'We do have the chocolate rabbit.'

Beverly whips around to face him. 'I am not going to apologize for the money. The bunny's all you get. Let's make that clear.'

'It's very clear.'

Will attempts to use the distraction to sneak the folder from Hannibal's hand. Hannibal lifts it out of his reach.

'Oh for—' Will reaches again, arms flailing and mouth pursing into a dangerous line. 'How old are you?'

Hannibal had perfectly pleasant plans for his Easter Sunday. They did not involve wrestling crime scene photos from Will's hands, but more importantly they did not involve tending to him when he inevitably sags into horror and confusion if he is allowed to descend into another's mind.

'Hannibal.' Their eyes meet. Will's fingers tighten on Hannibal's wrist. 'Give me the file.'

Quite unhappy with the outcome, Hannibal gives him the file.

He watches as Will's eyes darken, as his brows furrow. A slack, absent expression takes residence over his delicate features. No matter the eventual fallout, it might have been fascinating to observe—if the crime were worthy of Will's interest. It is not. How remarkable it would be if the Other Will had left this message! If Will had to decipher his own twin's

thought process, if he had to immerse himself into the dark whirls of the Other's regard—and who knows? Perhaps, on this day ripe in preternatural symbols, the forced empathy could be enough to bring together what has been torn asunder?

But the Other leaves his gifts for Hannibal's eyes only. Will's bruised empathy will be wasted on, all of people, Tobias Budge. A miserable concept indeed.

'He's showing off.'

A ripple of pain travels up the length of his arm. Hannibal peers down at his wrist, still clutched absent-mindedly in Will's hand—the force of the white-knuckled grip is one to rival circulation.

'Experienced killers bring a certain flair to their work that amateurs lack,' Hannibal cites; he is rather pleased with the phrasing of that thought. 'This killer knows his craft but has perhaps never felt the compulsion to broadcast it to the world before.'

Winston lets out a placatory whine. Will's fingers tighten again. Hannibal imagines the sound of snapping bone.

'What's changed then?' asks Beverly.

Will swallows hard. His fingers release Hannibal's wrist. Drawing away, they maintain the shape of claws. He's looking at neither of them when he says in a voice that is not his own, 'He met someone new.'

That is the last thing he has to say on the subject.

Later, the breakfast long cleared away and the day sunken under the torpid weight of Will's apathy, Hannibal asks him if he'd like to discuss the crime scene. He says no.

He says no, too, when Hannibal attempts to touch him.

'Touch might help ground you,' Hannibal argues. 'You adopted the mind of another; it's natural you'd have trouble coming back to yourself.'

'I'm back to myself. Whatever the fuck that means.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

The chocolate bunny rests in pieces on the porch railing between them. The night is tepid but cool enough that it won't melt the chocolate. Hannibal has eaten the head already but slowed down since to allow Will his share.

Will's eyes are sharp on the treat, making sure no piece tumbles accidentally to the ground where a dog might get a hold of it. He is not eating. He refused dinner, too, quoting the big breakfast as his excuse. Hannibal rather believes he is trying to starve whatever has taken residence in him.

If it is Tobias Budge he is starving, Hannibal certainly doesn't mind.

‘It’s not the photos.’

Unwilling to push, Hannibal stays silent. He picks up a piece of chocolate and takes a moment to quantify the flavour: the milk, the cocoa, the clinging aroma of aluminium foil. A breeze flitters in, brushing hair into his eyes. He needs a haircut soon.

‘That was shit, but it’s not the photos. It’s—it felt like I was someone else when I looked at it. Obviously. That’s the point. But when he left, I just felt—’ Will turns his head, hiding his eyes and showing Hannibal in their place the snake of hair that bisects the nape of his neck. ‘When he left, I felt empty. A well without water. And I realized that’s how I’ve felt for a while now. Like I’m drying out.’

Hannibal can’t bear to look at him. He focuses on the chocolate instead, the broken shards that no longer resemble a whole. ‘The water must be going somewhere, Will,’ he says. ‘Are you trying to water too many gardens? Or is there a thief?’

Will doesn’t answer. Hannibal doesn’t need him to. He knows too well who’s stealing Will’s life away.

After that day, Hannibal cannot excuse initiating contact with the Other again.

He replies, of course, to all queries—anything else would be unforgivably rude—but resists initiating conversation. Neglecting to feed Will is not an option, nor would it help to starve out this particular intruder, but Hannibal can still starve him of attention. If only just enough to balance out his own Will’s deficit.

It is not sustainable. Hannibal throws himself into caring for Will, only to find his thoughts drawn again and over to the king of the land where snow never melts. He thinks to leave him a piece of chocolate on the front porch. He thinks to tell him that Tobias Budge has gifted Hannibal a body, and what would the Other Will like to do about that? He thinks to tell him he is on his mind always. He does none of these.

Until he can better understand how to help the wraith of Will enter again the empty well of his body, he settles for distraction. Frederick Chilton is still alive when Hannibal has long decided this should not be so. It would be too risky to kill anyone for the Other right now—Hannibal might as well do something for himself this once.

Soon after he has embarked on this endeavour it becomes apparent that Frederick Chilton needs urgently to improve his lifestyle, if only so Hannibal can preserve the soundness of his own mind.

It is a Saturday when Hannibal makes an attempt on him again, and Frederick is off work—could he not go *anywhere* else? Out for lunch. Shopping. On an excursion to the museum, if he appreciates art as much as he claims. Better yet, on a lone hike in some lesser-known part of the woods, with pleasant sights and no one there to hear him scream.

Hannibal sighs, sliding lower in the seat. He’s been amusing himself by running his fingers over the stitching in the wheel’s leather, but his pads have grown numb from the stimulation. The nouveau-riche fish tank of Frederick’s abode mocks him with every glint of sunlight that

catches on a corner and blinks rainbow. It is a lovely day. If nothing else, he might at least go on a walk. Just up and down the street would be an improvement: it is unlikely to offer Hannibal a chance to apprehend him, but it would introduce some variance into the afternoon.

Behind the glass, Frederick's silhouette moves from the sofa to the armchair, dragging his laptop along. They're hooked together with the headphone cable and the wire mouse looped around his wrist. From what Hannibal can divine, he is either writing or pretending to be; either activity could easily be accomplished in a secondary location. Frederick lives alone, so neither does he have reason to guard the place like a stubborn mutt. Hannibal, on the other hand, has eight hungry bellies waiting for him back in Wolf Trap, and would really appreciate it if they could wrap this up soon.

He should have come at night. But he was shaken awake in the deep dark a few days back, clutched by the impossible fear that Will had disappeared into the mattress, and has since taken to compulsively verifying he is alive every other hour until dawn comes and lifts the veil of threat. Days are grace periods: Hannibal is awake then and can make sure to always be thinking of Will. At night, he risks forgetting.

A stir in the house. Frederick has got up to fetch a snack. Hannibal isn't doing this one for his Will, or the Other Will, or anyone at all except himself, and still he cannot even enjoy it properly.

His phone buzzes. Hannibal ignores it for all of twenty seconds. This is meant to be *his* time, but then Frederick is set on ruining it for him in either case.

What are you up to

Keeping interaction to a minimum has born this unexpected fruit: the Other Will asks him, now, these idle questions that sound wrong in his voice. Hannibal is sure he hates himself for it.

The faux casual tone is an attempt to deflect from the broken-off conversation they were having an hour ago—around the time Hannibal previously decided he was tired of Frederick's stubborn indolence. Hannibal made the mistake then of asking questions; the Other Will does not appreciate being cornered.

Before he replies, he closes his eyes and conjures Will's face: smooth, bright, blue-eyed.

Hunting, he replies truthfully. *Are we done with our previous conversation then?*

Predictably, the Other Will ignores the part of the message he is least interested in.

Who's the prey?

Doctor Frederick Chilton. Do you remember him?

Silence. In the empty space, a feeling takes shape, translated through the blank that meets Hannibal's expectant wait.

You disapprove. His mouth feels numb and bitter, like he's swallowed a mouthful of saline.

I'm disappointed with you, Hannibal. He can almost taste the click of the Other Will's tongue, the knit of his brow. *You're wasting your time on imagined slights. On chicks pecking at your ankles.*

Offense blooms in Hannibal's chest. There's little grace to his fingers tapping the keys—it's like he's hammering in nails.

I did not imagine this slight.

Yeah? What did he do?

Well, now Hannibal doesn't want to tell him.

He fixes his eyes on Frederick again. He's busy gloomily gnawing on carrot sticks. Hannibal tilts his head to catch a good glimpse of the sky above them, a perfect baby blue untarnished by cloud. The heat clusters. Though it is pleasantly mild now, the evening is going to be unbearable.

The phone hums against his thigh. Hannibal's fingers tighten around it until he can feel the edge digging into bone.

There's nothing appealing to a boy stomping around the woods, throwing stones at squirrels. You should be killing wolves

Hannibal's breath sticks in his throat, where it cloys sweet and sickly like a fever.

Wolves?

You've done it before. Not as petty. It becomes you

He *has* done it before—but not for himself.

How about Tobias Budge?

Hannibal lays the phone down on the passenger seat. His wrist is stiff. The screen blinks out the last message, then goes black.

How does the Other Will know about Tobias Budge?

Another buzz. *Saw you paid him a visit*

Hannibal doesn't know if he believes that.

Yes, the Other Will might well be watching him—stalking him through Baltimore much like he once stalked him through the belly of the woods—but the explanation strikes him as placatory.

While Hannibal is hardly bothered by the possibility that the Other Will might be watching him from the world's dark corners—if anything, he is bolstered by it—he does not enjoy the idea that private conversations with *his* Will might be less private than he thought.

Can the Other Will see what Hannibal's Will sees? Does he dream his dreams? When he closes his eyes, does he find himself at the bottom of Will's deepest cave, to hear wisps of their hushed words echoing on stone?

You would like me to kill Tobias Budge?

A beat. Another. What is taking such a long time to type up?

Yeah

Hannibal snorts.

He will have to refuse him. He doesn't suppose the Other Will will find that very funny.

I'm not sure I should be doing your bidding right now, *Will,* he begins gently, readying him for the burn. *It seems with everything I give you, I make you stronger.*

And that's bad how

Will has been getting weaker.

The Other Will's face will be marred with displeasure. He'll have drawn his shoulders back to preen it—or hunched them in a dejection he'll burn right through with anger once he's got his bearings again. Hannibal wants neither of it. And if it is to be, then he'd like to at least *see* it.

But.

That's not something you can help, the returning text reads. *You know that's where we're headed. Ghosts fade. Dreams fade*

That's not where I'm headed.

He'll have huffed at that, quick to grow impatient. *Where are you headed?*

Toward a reunion, Hannibal tells him. *A healing.*

He has once thought that putting Will Graham back together would only destroy him in the end. Now, he thinks it might be the only thing that can save him.

Still on about that?

Yes.

And how are you going to heal this wound, Hannibal?

Hannibal hesitates. *I'm not sure yet,* he admits.

Wow. Good luck with that

In light of the conversation, Frederick loses all appeal.

Instead, Hannibal drives to a garden centre to pick up a set of starter seeds for Will to consider. It's an open, roofless space covered in gravel that crunches under his shoes. The girl working the counter directs him to a section dedicated to May sowing and recommends the sweet asylums blooming on display. She smells like dew and dirt. He imagines the scent on Will and decides he'd enjoy it.

He considers the asylums, delicate things in white and lilac. The plaque, written out in the bulky capitals of black liquid marker, claims that they attract pollinators and do well in colder weather. He tries to imagine the summer ahead sweetly wet with colour, buzzing and biting and heady, but he cannot hold the picture in his mind long enough to place either Will or himself in it.

He leaves the flowers be. Will is more likely to enjoy something practical.

He is flicking through packets of cilantro when his phone comes to life again.

Whatever he expected the message to be, this isn't it.

You should let him fuck you

He takes a beat to digest the crude phrasing. He can't quite manage his offense.

Excuse me?

You want him to fade a little slower? Let him fuck you. That's my advice

And through this sexual act, I suppose he will draw on my life energy?

Exactly

Hannibal's eyes narrow. It is just as much fairy-tale logic as anything and so decidedly on brand, but he can't help but suspect an agenda. Perhaps it is that this sounds a little too clichéd and he has come to expect inventiveness. Or perhaps he finds it difficult to believe that the Other Will has any interest in slowing down the progress of whatever it is that's taking Hannibal's Will away from him.

I don't know how Will might feel about this plan, he writes, playing for time. It would be in poor taste to refuse him immediately, and so soon after the last denial.

Don't worry. I'll make it good for him

I don't see how you might do that.

Easy. I'll tell you what to do

And then he does.

Twice, Hannibal has to drag his eyes back to the seed packets on offer and read out the names like a mantra, with a single-mindedness matched only by the Other Will's ardour. *Cilantro, basil, rosemary.* It helps him keep the flush off his face, or so he hopes.

The fantasy the Other Will weaves for him winds around every gesture, stroke, every word. No detail is left to chance—

In Hannibal's experience, basil is a tender herb suited exclusively to warmer weather, so it is perhaps best to spare it the whims of a Washington spring. *Basil, rosemary, lemon thyme—*

It winds, tenderly specific, and then explodes into unabridged violence: a fervour of vengeance and desire so perverse, it makes Hannibal's blood cool and then rise again until he is lightheaded.

Lemon thyme. Parsley. Hands. Throat.

In the Other Will's kingdom, sex is had quite differently from anywhere else, Hannibal is sure, and cannot possibly be governed by laws of physics. Otherwise, he would have realized that what he proposes is likely to result in premature death for them both.

And there you go, the Other Will concludes.

Hannibal rests his hand on the shelf that holds the sunflower selection. He doesn't bear down. It is only a shadow of support.

And this excites you? he asks. *To imagine who you perceive your lesser twin mounting me like an animal?*

Yeah

Is this where Will's passion has drained? Has it been stolen and distorted into this madness that burns skin?

Do it tonight, the Other Will orders. *You can go kill Budge tomorrow*

Hannibal laughs. A passing couple sends him a curious look.

If I am to follow your instructions, I am not sure I'll be able to walk tomorrow, he types with shaking fingers.

You'll walk

He will not. He doesn't think he can even now.

He does, of course, walk eventually, once he has cooled the heat in his stomach and thighs, and set the phone to silent so he will be distracted no longer. He carries a selection of herbs to check-out, and the sunflowers, too, if only because he's spent too long pretending to look at them.

On his way home, he decides he has no intention of obeying the Other Will's wishes, not least because he isn't convinced of the intention behind them.

But then—if it *does* work?

Will doesn't smell like wet earth or the sun; he smells like dust and the dense air of shut windows. Hannibal shows him the seeds he's bought, explaining softly which ones he used to maintain in his home and which he believes would look best in their garden, and Will rests his head against his shoulder and listens without speaking. Hannibal hooks an arm around him. His body feels heavier than it has any right to. There's a note of rot to his breath: either he's forgotten to brush his teeth despite Hannibal's reminders, or he has a cavity that's escaped Hannibal's notice.

'Would you like to plant any of these?'

Will shrugs. 'I can plant them. But that's not the point of them, is it?'

'What is the point of them?'

'They grow. Colour. Someone picks and eats them.'

'That is the point of them, yes.'

'And who's going to do that?'

It's the utter defeat in his voice that does it.

'You are going to, Will.'

Will moves away from him. He gets to his feet, studiously avoiding Hannibal's eye, then disappears up the stairs, silence dragging behind him.

Hannibal imagines their summer again when he cooks dinner, infusing each fantasy with the smells and flavours of the dish: green asparagus, mint, leek and walnut. He struggles to settle on a future that sticks, but at least he can see a future. Will, it appears, doesn't believe any summer is possible at all.

And that is why after dinner Hannibal braces himself, breathes through the nose and then out his mouth, and says, when Will's back is turned,

'I would like you to fuck me.'

Will stills—turns.

The words are not Hannibal's own: he's reading off the Other Will's script, and now worries Will won't take them at face value with how uncanny they sound. So, he adds, flicking a lint off his sleeve, 'Would that be of interest?'

He immediately hopes Will says no. He hopes he is kind when he does.

‘Uh—sure. Right now?’

That is not the answer Hannibal expected. His head springs up, meeting Will’s eye.

‘I have to let the dogs out,’ Will explains.

‘Of course.’ Hannibal is nodding. ‘I would like to shower first.’

‘That works then.’

‘Yes.’

It takes Hannibal three full minutes to find the correct temperature for the water, and the way he does this is by realizing that in any case he cannot tell the difference.

He recognizes the anticipation as the right sort, all in all: they have not performed this particular sex act before and it is advisable to prepare for both success and disappointment. A degree of nervousness helps build up the promise of release; the feeling is well-worn and easily subjugated to Hannibal’s will.

But it isn’t normally so unpleasant. The ratio of elation and alarm is weighed down by a worry he cannot name, and it’s threatening to dip the whole of the balance into downright hysteria.

Before he returns downstairs, he takes the Other Will’s pendant off and deposits it in the pocket of his robe. It would be wrong to wear it during.

He checks his phone one last time. There are no new messages. He cannot help but feel that the Other Will is mocking him.

His Will stands at the bottom of the stairway, back turned, one hand fisted in his pocket, the other flat against his nape, rubbing his wait into fast-reddening skin. His shoulders hunch forward, elongating the neck. The toes on his bare feet curl against the wooden panels.

The topmost stair creaks when Hannibal puts his weight on it, and Will turns. Their eyes meet over something unspoken between them.

Hannibal swallows. He makes his way down, feeling each subsequent creak in the lowest point of his spine.

Will clears his throat.

‘Ready?’ He has looked away from him now.

‘Ready,’ Hannibal echoes.

Will puts one foot forward, halts, then extends an open hand to indicate Hannibal should lead the way.

Hannibal can feel his gaze on his back. It warms him more than the shower, though that was on the hot side now that he thinks of it. It's made his heart pick up its rhythm, and he imagines that in the damp heat of the evening he'll be slick with sweat within minutes.

'It's a warm night,' he notes as he removes his pyjama shirt. There really wasn't much point to putting it on in the first place, he thinks idly, but the Other Will wanted him to strip, so strip he shall. In the Other Will's fantasy, he is sure he was saying something lewd as he did so, but he struggles to remember what. He certainly wasn't commenting on the weather.

Another creak: the floor. Will has moved across the room to the wide windows of the lounge. The hinges screech painfully when he pushes them wide open.

The light on the bedside table is on. Hannibal wants to complain about mosquitoes, but there aren't very many this time of year, and the breeze that brushes the exposed plane of his back is well worth the few moths that might find their way in.

Will makes his way back to the bed. Hannibal is to undress him now, that is what the script says, but he cannot make himself touch him. He imagines intercepting Will before he sits on the edge of the mattress; imagines crawling astride him and peeling off the offending shirt. But it is the Other Will who inhabits each visual, not this one, and translating onto one an action meant for the other strikes Hannibal as a betrayal each way.

He is thinking this when he obediently leans forward and gives Will the kiss he is stretching into. He is still thinking it when he draws back and makes to remove his trousers, but then there's a hand on his wrist, and Will sighs, and he says,

'Stop.'

Hannibal stops.

Will shuffles back on the bed. He reclines until he's flat on his back, peering up at Hannibal critically.

There's a silence. Hannibal doesn't enjoy it.

'So,' Will drawls, eyes shifting away, 'this is an escalation.'

'We don't need to do anything you're uncomfortable with.'

'Are you gonna sit?'

Hannibal sits. This way, he has his back to Will and must twist his body to meet his eye. He enjoys that.

Will spends a moment weighing something in himself, or so Hannibal guesses: he can't see him.

'I guess I am uncomfortable,' he decides finally. 'I'm uncomfortable with the fact I've never seen you naked.'

The burst of confusion nearly does make Hannibal turn. ‘You—have.’

A shift of air behind Hannibal’s back. Will is waving a hand to indicate dismissal. ‘Glimpses,’ he says.

‘That—’

‘I’ve never seen you come,’ Will changes tack, clearly aware now that he’s being unreasonable. ‘How about that?’

‘It is hardly my fault if you’re a selfish lover,’ Hannibal hisses, doubly struck when this elicits a laugh.

‘I’m only a “selfish lover,”’ he frames the words in *air quotes,* as though there is anything figurative about the label, ‘because you want me to be.’

‘If you are dissatisfied with our sex life, you are free to say so.’

‘Are you dissatisfied?’

‘No.’

‘No,’ Will confirms, as though he’s already known as much but can’t help but wonder at it. ‘You’re shockingly low-maintenance.’ Hannibal can’t see the grin, but he hears it in his voice. ‘At least in bed.’

‘And what does that mean?’ He knows what it means. The offense sizzles on his skin.

A groan. ‘What it means is, you don’t ask for much.’

‘I’m asking now.’

Will sobers.

‘Yeah,’ he admits. ‘Then I guess I’m saying no.’

That is just about all he can take.

‘Wait.’

The hand clutching his wrist is back, fingers splayed wide and warm. It stops him halfway to standing, which is awkward to maintain for very long. He sits back down.

‘Look, I—I don’t know how much time we have. Do you?’

Hannibal looks at him.

‘Don’t—I mean, you feel it too. You feel something. Everyday there’s less. You feel it. I feel it.’

Hannibal’s lips tug up.

‘And you are sure you know what I feel?’

‘Yeah.’ His eyes are tired, sinking. ‘I don’t know how it ends, but it ends. Soon. Before that happens, I just want—damn it. Some things need to be told, eventually. If not now, when?’

Hannibal meets his eye. He knows of all the things that must be told; he can taste them on his tongue.

But when he tries to speak, the words die on his lips.

If touching Will the way the Other wanted to be touched is a betrayal, what would this be? What’s larger than betrayal? What’s a crime that surpasses the earthly wounds humans deal one another?

Heresy, Hannibal thinks. It would be *heresy* to say it, to say it first to the one the Other Will believes—fears?—is Hannibal’s choice, Hannibal’s perfect creation, the apple in Hannibal’s eye. The one Hannibal wants.

He *is*.

But—

Will catches it. Whatever Hannibal can’t say, he catches it.

‘Not that,’ he says softly, the minutest shake of his head. A curl spills free over his forehead. ‘Just—show me. And I show you. Yeah?’

Hannibal tucks the curl behind Will’s ear. His hand lingers there, feeling at the thin skin stretched over the cartilage, almost see-through.

Then, he is kissing him and pulling his shirt off the way he pulls it off every time, the way that feels theirs.

Will rolls them over to peel away Hannibal’s trousers. The waistband snaps on Hannibal’s thigh, just above the knee, before Will goes lower and drags them all the way off. His hands are everywhere: on Hannibal’s feet, ankles, knees. He kisses over the rim of Hannibal’s ass, the crease of his thighs, he plants pecks up and down his cock and stomach. For quite a while, Hannibal is doing just fine distinguishing between every nip, stroke and lick. He has thrown his forearm over his eyes and his senses feel heightened, so it is like a game: where is Will now? What does each shuffle, huff, dip of the mattress under Hannibal’s back, what does each accidental brush of Will’s knee indicate about his next destination?

Eventually, it all bleeds together. If pressed, Hannibal would say the change comes seconds after he does, quietly but shuddering like he’s been thrown into cold water, and then Will is over him everywhere all at once, grinding their cocks together with thorough abandon—Hannibal tries half-heartedly to ease him off but can never commit to it. He doesn’t know where he’s being touched after that. Everywhere *burns*. Will yanks himself away from him to stave off his own release, but the respite lasts mere seconds, because then he is back to

sucking bruises into Hannibal's neck, and every squirm of overstimulation only adds to his zeal.

'Will, I can't—'

'Should have thought of that before. You owe me a whole bunch of these now.'

Hannibal gives a breathless laugh. Everything he does is breathless now: he is sure Will has sucked all the air out of him when he bit into his neck.

'I'm afraid I'm a little too old to—'

'To what? To whine? I agree.'

Hannibal strokes an open palm down Will's chest, gently settles the nipple between the flat of his finger and the knuckle of his thumb, and *twists*.

Will's mouth is unfortunately close to Hannibal's ear, and the resulting curse near deafens him.

'What the—here I am, trying to be nice—'

'I—I think the 'phasia's coming back—'

'What?'

Hannibal clears his throat and tries to enunciate. 'I think the aphasia might be coming back, Will. *Unreasonable* is the word you're looking for.'

'No, unreasonable would be telling you that you *have* to come again. You don't. I don't mind either way.'

'How courteous of you.'

'I know.'

Hannibal twines his fingers in Will's hair. He is pinned down under his weight, which makes the not-quite-pain easier to bear: the instinct to pull away lives in his stomach and in his thighs, but Will is leaden there, jutting into flesh. An unreasonable part of Hannibal is convinced he cannot endure the touch a moment longer. The reasonable part of him sees the evidence of the previous several moments and knows he can endure it fine. A third part of him wants to endure it forever.

'You're wrong,' he tells Will.

'Hm. Wrong about what?'

He gives a lazy thrust where they lay tucked close together at the hip, chuckling when Hannibal reflexively tightens the hold on his hair.

Hannibal watches the moth skittering across the ceiling in search of the bulb, waiting for the sugary malaise to abate before he attempts speech. The papery wings flutter ineffectually, tender and bare. The shadows they cast are blown out of proportion, carving the wall in a bizarre geometry of light and dark.

‘It doesn’t end,’ he says. ‘We might change, but we don’t end.’

Will pulls back to look at him. Hannibal doesn’t meet his eye: he can sense the doubt through the skin where he touches.

Will does not believe. The Other Will lacks faith. But it is no matter.

Hannibal is blind enough for the three of them.

‘Do you still want me to fuck you?’ Will asks.

He wants it so much it chokes him.

‘That a yes? The weird half-nodding thing?’

‘Shall I pinch you again, Will?’

Will pins his wrists to the mattress as though that could stop him.

‘I’m not sure I’ve done this before,’ he warns Hannibal.

‘You can take it slow.’

‘You’ll have to tell me what to do.’

‘I will.’

Will is keen on being instructed but Hannibal isn’t a competent teacher today. He doesn’t know how much is too much and how fast is too fast; Will laying a hand on his stomach is already both at once. It is testament to how completely Hannibal has been spent that even Will telling him off for being unhelpful fails to push blood back into his cock.

The process seems to be affecting Will in the opposite way: he is softening fast.

‘This is what your happy pills do,’ he grouses, stroking himself with a trembling hand. ‘Are you happy now?’

‘You’re nervous.’

‘Shut up.’

In the end, Hannibal is forced to flip them over and make it entirely clear to Will that he is getting what he’s been promised either way. It takes Will all of twenty-five seconds being manhandled to start growing hard again, meaning the whole of the panic was a waste of everyone’s energy. Hannibal is feeling generous, so he does not give voice to this conclusion.

When he sinks on Will, he wonders whether he might be able to come again after all. The heat that builds in him as he settles must be siphoned off somehow or he'll lie all night awake —though if Will is sleeping spent next to him, Hannibal might not mind.

He gives his first loud moan when Will bucks up at a particularly vicious drop. Buster immediately comes to investigate, yapping his alarm. Will tries to pet him calm but he can't quite reach, and Hannibal refuses to get off to attend to Buster of all things—he might consider it for Zoe perhaps, but certainly not for Buster.

Buster's continued distress soon compels the rest of the pack to pick up on the mood, and suddenly half the mutts are voicing their disagreement with Hannibal having a pleasant time. Will tells him to get off. When refused, he employs a new weapon Hannibal never realized he had in his arsenal and calls him *sweetheart.*

Hannibal gets off. He lies back on the pillows as Will tends to the dogs' fraying nerves and corrals them into the kitchen.

He is unhappy for a little while, but then Will comes back and thrusts into him and Hannibal suddenly remembers he is raw from all of the touching and that he cannot—and he couldn't tell if the dogs were barking anymore, and scrambles to grip at the headboard and then Will's hair and shoulders and ass, wholly unable to settle long enough to decide, and Will—and he's —

And then, a man comes through the window.

He has a gun.

Hannibal's mind has melted away to nothing. He does not think; he acts.

He throws Will off, he shoves at him so he slips down the side of the bed and lands on the floor—it's not much of a hiding spot, but it is better than nothing.

He attempts to stand. His knees are buckling beneath him. There is come drying on his stomach, there is lube running down his thighs, and Will's saliva sticks in his chest hair. He blinks away the haze—his eyes go to the rifle hung above the fireplace, but Tobias Budge stands between him and it.

He could make a run for the kitchen, only he'd be turning his back on Budge, and he would be leaving Will.

He has his hands and his teeth, but that is not enough unless Tobias lowers the gun: he will shoot Hannibal before he makes it halfway across the room.

'Mr Budge,' he croaks, throat still tight from the keens he was making ten seconds prior. 'The piano is just through there.'

Tobias lowers his gun.

He fires.

The bang still ringing in his ears, Hannibal turns to Will before the explosion of pain in his knee reaches his awareness at all—and then he is falling to the floor, pushing and pushing at the agony until it's tucked into a corner—until he finds a way to think again—

'Were you the one who called Franklyn and told him to run? Or did you have your fuckboy do it? He did tell me it didn't sound like you.'

He can hear the dogs barking now, through the shut door to the kitchen.

'Do you think you threaten me? That you can come and take away what's mine? He didn't run—he came *straight to me.*'

Hannibal tries to lift himself to all fours but slips on the blood. It's seeping into the cracks between the floorboards; it will be impossible to get out.

'You feel protective of Franklyn.' Hannibal coughs. It feels like there should be blood coming out of his mouth—the smell is so strong he can taste it—but it's just milky saliva. 'I can assure you I had no intention of hurting him before you decided to invade my house. Now might be a different matter.'

Tobias laughs. 'I'd have let you do it, you know. If you'd asked. If you hadn't got anyone else involved—if you came to me in peace, Doctor Lecter.'

'I did.'

Hannibal can feel the bone in his leg. It is rare to feel such a thing: it fascinates him for a single breathless second before he remembers Will, trapped in the corner of the room behind him. Hannibal's cheek is pressed against the floor and through its vibrations he can feel Will moving: he must be attempting to crawl under the bed. Hannibal only hopes it is to stay there, not come out the other side and do something foolish.

'I followed you once. Months ago—I've been thinking of you since.'

'I'm flattered.'

'You made me believe you were looking for companionship, Doctor. That you were looking for understanding.'

Will is almost all the way there. Hannibal tries to rise again.

'We often see our own desires reflected in others,' he wheezes through a tight jaw.

If Will does do something foolish, Hannibal stands little chance of protecting him. But he may at least get closer to Tobias, confuse him with the need to guard himself in two directions. Since standing hasn't worked, Hannibal resigns to crawling. It looks less dignified but does the job just as well.

His head is down because he can't keep it up. The wooden floor. The pollen and dirt stuck in the creaks. The shadows cast by the moths batting themselves against the bedroom light.

Did Hannibal, too, see only his own desire reflected in the Other Will? Did he fool himself, believing for a moment that the Other held any sentiment at all for his twin? Did he betray him in the end: if not with words, then with sounds and touches? Was he a heretic merely by virtue of showing his belly to the wrong god?

Tobias believes Hannibal engineered a phone call to warn Franklyn of danger, which means someone *has* called Franklyn to warn him off; if not the Other Will, then who? Perhaps tonight was never to be about making Will stronger. Perhaps it was about making Hannibal weaker. And when the Other Will called Franklyn, and Franklyn played the role of supplicant for which he'd been primed, when Tobias connected Hannibal's new interest with the new threat, when he invaded the house—he found Hannibal bare, wrung out, defenceless.

His skin feels paper-thin: the wing on a moth.

'Now, I'll have to kill both of you,' someone says mournfully. Oh—Tobias. It's Tobias. The mockery doesn't work with the tone of his voice.

'Yes,' Hannibal grunts. 'I imagined that was the plan.'

But Hannibal will live: that is how it happens. The Other Will is going to take everything from him and then he is going to leave him alive—that was always how it was meant to be.

Was that the deal then? Was that the deal Hannibal made to be led out of the woods, all those years ago?

The tips of Tobias's shoes glisten before his eyes, polished like the shoes on the trombonist, whose body is now the instrument on which Will's mind plays the melody to his nightmares. Hannibal looks very much the supplicant now, laid out on the floor: naked, vulnerable, bleeding hot blood and gasping hot breaths.

He has the oddest sense of a palm braced on his shoulder. When he peers behind him, he sees only the empty room.

He is not sure how much longer he's going to stay conscious.

'I'd better close that window,' Tobias says, smile etched into his voice. 'You shouldn't leave it wide open like this. You have bugs coming in.'

He turns toward the window, one hand coming up to close on the handle.

The other, bearing the gun—

It drops to his side.

And Hannibal:

leaps.

It is like falling asleep. He misses entirely the exact moment when everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

And cut to black. If you're eager for some answers, well, the next chapter is going to muddy the waters even more, but it's also going to offer one or two big revelations... It is of course, at long last, titled *The Other Will*. I am hugely excited to share this one with you!

A big thank you to everyone who commented on the previous chapter! I'm a little busy with Christmas at the moment, but will reply when I get the chance. I have now realized there was a plot issue that exacerbated my writer's block, solved the issue, and should be back on track for weekly updates!

Meanwhile, let me know what you think - and have a lovely holiday.

The Other Will

Chapter Summary

Hannibal comes to at the hospital and finds the world not quite the same as he left it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nineteen: The Other Will.

Something rough and unpleasant is at his cheek. He wants to shove it away, but he forgets where his hands are.

It might be the pillow. He must have put on the green pillowcase in cheap cotton. Why would he do such a thing? Was everything else in the wash?

Maybe Will was the one who put it on. He wouldn't have known he was doing anything wrong; Hannibal has never told him these pillowcases were of poor quality.

He dreams. In his dream, glass is strewn on the floor. It digs into the meat of his palms, into his bare thighs—he is thrown off Tobias—the pain erupts, swallows, digests him and spits him out on the other side, onto the hard floor, his mouth full of flesh that bleeds through the gaps between his teeth.

Maybe he is going to die. Maybe they have been in their snow globe all along and now it has shattered against the floorboards. Did Will knock it over that time in Hannibal's kitchen in Baltimore? Was it on a high shelf where he didn't properly see, and came tumbling down with everything else?

He lacks the strength to look up at Tobias, so he rolls onto his back instead. Then, he sees it.

It wasn't Tobias who threw him off. It was the thing that came through the window.

Not a mosquito, not a bug, not a moth—this beast does not care if glass is in its way.

The Other Will isn't a man, Hannibal can see it now. He is thing and he is animal and he is god, more than human and less than human all at once. He is trailing strings of meat from his fangs. He is scraping ribbons of skin from Tobias's neck. He beats him, black and blue and bloody, he breaks bone and he swallows flesh with the hunger of a boy who's just emerged on the other side of a long, vicious winter.

He has come to save them after all.

Maybe he *was* going to let Hannibal's Will die. Maybe he *was* going to abandon Hannibal amid a barren field of dead flesh, broken and shamed. But he *didn't.*

'—you know what to tell him.'

'How am I supposed to when you haven't even—'

'You'll be fine.'

Hannibal blinks. The pillow, he realizes now, smells like disinfectant.

He finds one hand. He uses it to find his cheek. He cannot find the pillow.

'Hey, hey—leave that.' Something grabs at him. Hannibal blinks and sees Will—a moment of terror—no, it's *his* Will, blue-eyed, long-faced, stubble growing over a scab he has scratched bloody. Another mosquito? Or a shard of glass?

'Wrong pillow,' Hannibal tells him. 'I don't want this one.'

'That's a bandage, Hannibal. You got a gash on your cheek from when the window broke. We're at the hospital—'

Then, Hannibal remembers.

'We have to go back.' He is talking quickly, the words blurring together in the urgency that grips him, from the stomach all the way to the pounding between his eyes. 'He left the body —he never cleans up—we have to go—'

'What is he talking about?'

It's another voice, too high to be Will's. Abigail drifts into his field of vision. They *are* at the hospital: Hannibal can smell the floor cleaner, the lingering scent of canteen food, the syrupy sweetness of antibiotics—death.

He searches for the pain. He's lost it. He's shoved it into a corner too deep. He's dropped it into a well. A cavern in the mind—

'Will.' It doesn't matter in that moment if Abigail hears; it doesn't matter that Will learns of the multitude of his betrayals. All that matters is that Tobias Budge's body, torn wide open, lies abandoned on the wooden floors of Wolf Trap, and every minute Hannibal spends shielding the truth is another minute when the FBI are looking for Will—

'I'm right here—'

'No, the Other Will—'

'Hannibal, that's—that's a story. That's a story we tell each other. Right? Remember that?'

'No—'

‘You attacked Budge,’ Will whispers urgently. He has one hand planted on Hannibal’s forehead, keeping him flat against the pillow, as though Will is worried he might struggle. ‘You both fell into the window. He threw you off, but he’d dropped the gun and he was injured, so he ran. You hit your head. You lost consciousness. I drove you to the hospital.’

Hannibal is shaking his head. He knows what he saw in his dream. Did Will not see it too?

‘Should I go get a doctor?’

Abigail is here, yes. Hannibal has forgotten. She looks very pale in the cold light.

Will raises a hand to halt her. ‘In a moment.’

Hannibal doesn’t want a doctor. He wants Will to understand what he is saying to him.

‘Will,’ he tries again, ‘the FBI will find the body—’

‘There is no body, Hannibal. Budge ran.’

‘He didn’t—’

‘The FBI have already been to the house. They’re going to want to talk to you when you sound a little less insane, alright? You’ve been out for hours. They had to get you straight into surgery.’

There’s something wrong with Hannibal’s brain: it is processing the world as though engaged in a long-distance phone call. Will is finished talking by the time Hannibal understands that he began. When the meaning catches up, he goes rigid.

‘To the house?’

‘Yes.’ Will’s hand is still on his forehead, still pressing down. It feels so heavy. ‘No body, Hannibal. They’ve already searched it. They searched the grounds. They didn’t find anyone.’

It cannot be true. Hannibal is opening his mouth to argue, but then his eyes snag on the abortive look that Will casts Abigail’s way. Of course: Will is lying. Will is trying to shield Abigail from the truth. He doesn’t want her involved.

Hannibal has never been very good at not getting Abigail involved, but he supposes if Will wants him to, he can at least attempt it.

He closes his mouth. He will wait until she is out of the room.

At this, Will smiles. Hannibal was right: this is what he wanted. He tries to smile back, but he isn’t sure he succeeds.

‘They have given me a lot of drugs,’ he says. ‘Can you tell?’

Will’s teeth are white as fresh snow. It is a little unsettling. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘We can tell.’

After that, the thread of consciousness slips from Hannibal's grasp. He goes looking for it, but when he picks up something that resembles it in shape, it starts to writhe in his hand. A worm.

The Other Will is here with him. Hannibal thinks that here might be France. He rarely visits: it's a gilded cage, the way he'd made it, holding sweetly captive his childhood and the family that locked the door on him the moment he flew the coop.

The Other Will does not care about any of that. He likes it here because it's warm and because he can smell the sea. 'I'll catch you a fish,' he promises Hannibal. 'What do you want? Salmon? Shark? Anything you like.'

Hannibal wants to ask for a great white, but he's learnt his lesson with the bear and knows not to be greedy. 'I'm not very hungry,' he tells him.

Will grins, sparks of sunlight dancing in his black eyes. 'That's a lie,' he says. 'You're always hungry.'

He spends too long in France and misses his opportunity to speak with Will in private. By the time his eyes slide open, Abigail is back in the hospital room, pulling off a jacket and setting down bags of food. She gives Will something glinting. He pockets the treasure before Hannibal manages more than a glimpse.

'What's that?' he asks.

'Huh? Oh. It's just the car keys, Hannibal.'

Hannibal doesn't think so. Even when he is shown, the way the light curls around the ring is uncanny. Maybe this is a thing Will wants him to lie about as well.

A nurse comes and palms at Hannibal's leg, right over where he cannot feel a single thing. It makes him laugh a little: he'd told the Other Will he might not be able to walk the next day, and here he is.

The nurse tells Hannibal he should try and eat something, so Will takes out the food. It shimmers. Hannibal asks him what it is and Will says it's tomato soup. Hannibal cannot tell if this one's a lie or not.

He looks from the spoon to the plastic bowl to Will. If he eats it, he is going to be sick, he can feel it building in him, and he does not want that.

'What is it?' he asks Will again.

Will tells him it's tomato soup.

'What's in it?' Hannibal asks.

Will says tomatoes and broth. Hannibal is bone-deep hungry and that is making him feel sick, too, but broth could be anything. He wants to ask Will what he thinks they would have used for it. He recognizes that if Abigail bought the soup at a restaurant, Will might not know.

The nurse offers to take the spoon from Will. He snaps at her to stay away. He does not know how to handle the nurses. Hannibal hopes he doesn't have to stay here very long, or Will is going to turn them all against him.

'I'll be back in twenty minutes,' Will says to Abigail. 'Can you—'

'Yeah.'

Will goes; Abigail stays. It is the reverse of what Hannibal wanted.

She tells him about a new girl at the ward. The new girl's name is Cynthia. Abigail's voice is uneven and pinched, but it is an interesting story. Hannibal closes his eyes and listens to the way the words wrap around the numb that is his right knee.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. *Go.*'

Abigail's hand is in Hannibal's. He squeezes back. She leans in and says something into his ear, but he loses it in the hum.

When the hum stops, it is only Will and the nurse. Hannibal thinks it is a different nurse, though he's not sure. Will is sat on the edge of the bed and he is cutting a bun in half with a butter knife.

He lays out the two halves on a breakfast plate. Strands of the bread stick up: the knife is too dull to cut evenly.

Will shows him the butter he brought. It is Hannibal's favourite brand. He watches Will scrape some off the cube and spread it on the one half, then the other. Next comes a jar of jam. It's strawberry jam, he tells Hannibal, though that's unnecessary because Hannibal can smell as much.

Will eats his half of the bun first, then helps Hannibal eat his. It has a pleasant taste, unsophisticated but comforting. Hannibal promises he will eat another the next time he wakes.

Then, it is day. It might have been that the last time Hannibal was conscious, but it is only now that he can tell.

Will is asleep in a chair, curled into a ball. Hannibal can smell him from across the room: sweat, inflammation and fear. He cannot see any injuries on him, so he supposes the inflammation will be a cold or some stray hospital bug; if strawberry jam sandwiches are the only thing he's been eating, it's no surprise his immunity has taken a hit.

The sun pierces through the pulled shutters. Hannibal blinks the afterimage from his retina and shuffles to find the button on the bed that will make it rise. Once sat up, he carefully lifts the corner of the sheet and finds his leg.

The first thing he feels is a powerful surge of relief. The numbness of the past hours made him wonder, but the leg is there, looking whole. It is veined dark all the way down to the ankle and it is wrapped in a veritable luxury of bandages, but it is there.

His fingernails have grown in long enough that he can easily pinch deep into skin. Delayed and deadened, the pain from his thigh does eventually reach his brain; so does the pain from his ankle.

For the final trial, he pushes two fingers into the pillow of bandage and gauze directly over the shot wound.

He has to bend in half and swallow fast, twice, to stop the nausea that arrives on the tail end of agony.

'God—you okay?'

'Yes,' Hannibal says, sitting up straight. 'I wanted to check if I still had feeling in my leg.'

Will runs a hand down his face. It's swollen with exhaustion. 'I could have told you that. They had to pump you full of morphine to stop you jabbing at it.'

'Jabbing?'

'Don't ask me for your logic there. I was thinking maybe you felt like the bullet was still in there and you were trying to pull it out. It actually went straight through.'

Hannibal nods. He watches as Will makes his way across the room to open the shutters. The outside is a honeyed daze.

'Is it May yet?'

Will's brows furrow. He goes back to the chair, finds his phone.

'Tomorrow,' he says.

'Will I be able to walk?'

Will looks away sharply.

'They don't know for sure.' He sounds like an automaton. 'Rest, then physical therapy, then crutches, then walking stick. Then we'll see.'

Hannibal closes his eyes. Every protest that comes to his mind is the utterance of a child. He will *not* walk with crutches. He will *not* use a walking stick. This is one summer he did not imagine.

The rejection of this future is a sting in the back of his throat, the one that precedes tears. He breathes through it.

'I suppose it could be worse,' is what he says instead.

It does not sound convincing. Will hears as much. In the anger that blooms in him, he grows at least an inch.

‘Yes, Hannibal, it *could* be worse! You nearly bled out on the way. Don’t you dare—you were damn lucky to wake up at all. You know that?’

Hannibal doesn’t feel lucky. He understands that Will would rather not hear him say so.

To distract himself from berating him further, Will has him drinking water. It tastes strangely salty on Hannibal’s tongue and hurts his throat when he swallows.

‘You said you drove me here,’ he remembers suddenly.

‘Yeah, I took your car. Might have to change the upholstery. You were bleeding out over it.’

‘Why didn’t you call an ambulance?’

‘I—I don’t know. I panicked.’ He puts the cup down with entirely too much force. ‘Sorry for not thinking of the upholstery.’

Hannibal decides not to press the issue for now. There is a more salient matter that needs discussing.

‘Tobias seemed convinced I called Franklyn and urged him to stay away,’ he starts, ignoring Will’s wince. The memories of the night lie beyond a veil of which Hannibal cannot lift more than a single corner. Each word tastes sour on his tongue. ‘I did not. But someone did.’

Will says nothing.

‘I know who called him,’ Hannibal explains.

‘Do you?’

‘Yes. I’ve already told you: it was the Other Will.’

Will is staring at him. Hannibal expects him to start crying or shouting—he does neither.

‘Please don’t do this,’ Will says weakly.

But the confession is spilling from Hannibal’s lips: he has carried it alone too long. ‘He was jealous of you. He sent Tobias Budge to Wolf Trap to punish me, but he changed his mind. He killed Tobias—if you are telling the truth and he didn’t do it in the house like I remember, then he must have done it in the woods after Tobias ran—’

‘Hannibal—’

‘You have told me yourself you don’t feel whole. The illness has split you in two, but if we can find a way to heal the cut—if we can redo somehow what first fractured you, but translate it onto a new canvas, then you would be resurrected.’

He searches Will's face for a hint of recognition. He finds only an utter blankness. It must be that Hannibal is speaking in fairy tales and Will has outgrown the time he needed them. To convince him, Hannibal will have to give him something tangible.

'He killed Randall Tier,' he says quickly. 'You knew never to believe what I told you about Randall Tier. You knew he didn't run—that is because the Other Will killed him, and I hid the body—'

Will is on him then, grabbing his chin, forcing him to meet his eye.

'Hannibal.' In contrast to the painful grip he has on him, Will's voice is pleading. 'Jack Crawford is coming here this afternoon. Do you understand? He's going to ask about Budge and I can't have you telling him these—they're just stories, do you understand? You're still high—'

'I am not.' Hannibal tries to shake his head, but he isn't strong enough to dislodge Will's hold. 'I feel perfectly clear.'

That is a lie. He can form full sentences and he understands from the light that it is morning; but his mind is a tangle of fear and wonder.

'You hit your head,' Will insists. 'You lost a bathtub's worth of blood. You're high. Can you please just shut up?'

'I left him food,' Hannibal remembers suddenly. 'I left food for him on Christmas Day, on the porch in Wolf Trap, and when I returned it was gone—'

'Yeah, a wild animal ate it. Probably a coyote—or a fucking squirrel.'

Kicking stones at squirrels.

'I have proof.'

'Please just stop,' Will's voice is breaking. 'You're scaring me. You get that? I'm the crazy one. I need you sane. Hannibal—'

But Hannibal is already digging through the travel bag left for him on the nightstand—Alana, he would guess, come bearing her gifts in the night. Pyjamas, slippers, his sketchbook. And here in his palm, the phone.

He opens the messaging app.

The Other Will is not there.

The world—

tilts.

He goes through each messaging thread, as though by sheer force of will he can transform them into something they are not. He has never saved the Other Will's number, but he knows

it by heart: he could recite the digits in his sleep. It is not here.

The world stumbles—falls.

All the words exchanged between them. Every question, every declaration, every story. Gone.

Even in Hannibal's memory, even now, they are fading: fading as fast as the Will in front of him takes on contours and fills in real. What if it was never Will who was less than real? What if it is Hannibal himself?

Will was right after all. There is nothing at the bottom of this cavern: that's what voids are.

Nothing that happens later concerns Hannibal very much.

Will must have pried the phone out of his hand, because it isn't there anymore. He must have made Hannibal another sandwich, because Hannibal is eating. Jack Crawford must be there, because Will is at his side, telling the story of what happened and waiting for Hannibal to murmur his confirmation. Abigail is nowhere to be seen. Hannibal doesn't ask Will about her: he has the perverse thought that he might have imagined her, too, and he doesn't want to scare Will again.

They go home two days later. A piece of cardboard sits where the lounge window used to be. Hannibal has his crutches now, but he's not used to them yet, and the hobble from the car to the house thoroughly exhausts him. The taxi driver helps them carry in Hannibal's things: his clothes, his travel bag, his antibiotics and his morphine.

Inside, Hannibal is making his way toward the bed when Will intervenes.

'I thought we could sleep upstairs.' He fidgets with the jacket thrown over his arm, pulling at the buttons.

Hannibal realizes he has forgotten to be afraid. Of course Will does not want to sleep in the room where they were ambushed; of course Hannibal should have expressed a preference to move upstairs, too. But the memory of the incident is tainted with the suspicion that has fallen over his life like a duvet. It shields every hurt, every concern and pleasure, from Hannibal's direct experience.

The mattress is still in Abigail's room. It isn't truly Abigail's room, but her once-upon presence is the only distinguishing feature of the bare space. Will lowers him onto it—his old bed, just as lumpy as Hannibal remembers it. There is a hint of comfort in that, though Hannibal can't quite get a hold of it.

Once Hannibal has settled, Will fetches Zoe and deposits her on his chest. 'Might as well,' he says. 'Not like I'll be giving this one away.'

Zoe noses at Hannibal for a while, huffing her displeasure at the hospital scents she finds burrowed into his skin, then decides he needs to be cleaned once and for all and sets to licking him wet and itchy. Hannibal drifts to sleep then back awake, to stare at the ceiling that grows darker with the hours that pass.

Dinner is an omelette. It's a little overdone, but not horrible. Hannibal imagines that if the circumstances were different, he would delight in it because Will made it for him. Today, he feels merely indifferent.

He isn't allowed to get his knee wet, so they wrap it in plastic foil before they navigate the shower. Though Will helps him, merely standing upright for more than a few minutes at a time makes Hannibal feel unsure on his feet and adrift. Seasick.

On the mattress, he lays on his side for what feels like hours, arms wrapped around his stomach, eyes pinched shut against the sounds of paws and winds. He swallows each wave of bile before it leaves his throat.

When Will is showered, he doesn't go downstairs to do the dishes like he said he would. Instead, he crawls in with him, curls into the shape that Hannibal's bent body has made, and cries. Like the floor that fails to support Hannibal's buckling knees, Will too becomes the sea: he throws his sobs against shore, he misses breaths and storms around days of accumulated despair, then quietens into morose whimpers, stroking down Hannibal's arms as though to reassure himself he is material.

'I don't know what to do,' he whispers to Hannibal. 'I don't know what I'm going to do.'

Hannibal cannot save him from this, but he could comfort him: he could tell him of his love, of the world they reign, of enjoying the omelette he'd made for dinner. He does not. He has not told him anything at all meaningful since that day at the hospital because he doesn't wish to lie: and how can he ensure he is not when the very fundaments of his reality are crumbling around him?

This is what you took from me, he thinks. My memory, my mind, my heart. The ability to bring Will comfort. The ability to get up and go. The ability to find the sea, to throw a party, to take a life, to visit Abigail at her ward. That is the price I pay, and not even for having you: merely for *knowing* you.

He can't sleep. Will's breaths lengthen, his body grows lax, and still Hannibal does not sleep. When he decides he needs the bathroom, he removes first one arm from around Will then the other, gently enough so as not to rouse him, and makes his way across the house step by step, following the trail he has mapped out of where the floorboards creak the least.

Somehow, Will does not wake—or maybe he only pretends not to.

Hannibal is breathless by the time he reaches the bathroom.

When he is done, he washes his hands methodically, as though he were preparing for surgery. Once upon a time, he would have stood like this over deep steel sinks, a box of surgical gloves set out ready at his side. Soap travels between his fingers, down his wrists. That is real: the memory then and the sensation now. It is a thing reclaimed.

He closes his hand. Opens.

And then he remembers, suddenly, Abigail's hand in his. It flashes as vivid as though he were still in that hospital room—he remembers the way she smelled, the tremor in her, and the thing she said, which he did not hear then but hears now: whispered, careful, the brush of hair over his face, the way it tickled.

'He knows.'

She whispered it and then she fled. She whispered it because she wanted no one except Hannibal to hear. Because *Will* was in the room with them.

Is that real?

It seems a strange mirage for his mind to produce. After all, Hannibal's mind has long cast Will into the role of innocent, blind to the goings-on to which Hannibal and Abigail are privy. It is theoretically possible that the *he* in question was Jack, that she merely wanted to protect this strange message from Will's ears to spare him the worry. But why not tell Hannibal when they were alone, when Will left to buy the bread and jam? Why tell him about Cynthia's misadventures, but not a word of this danger he should beware?

The bulb over the sink buzzes tinny like an insistent mosquito. Hannibal's legs threaten to give way, but he cannot talk himself into returning to the bedroom.

He doesn't know what to believe: Abigail's warning? The Other Will's gifts? His Will's lies?

His mind, he thinks. His memory. His faith.

He has once walked the woods alongside his hunter, and he knew he was a story and he knew he was real. He has once thought himself blind enough to carry the world on his shoulders; he lay in that bed downstairs and he watched the play of light and shadow on the ceiling, and he believed he could have what he wanted. That it did not have to kill him. That he was made for it.

How can he name it faith if he strays so easily?

Hannibal goes downstairs. He finds his travel bag. He finds his phone.

He doesn't know if it is faith driving him or desperation; or maybe it's that same childishness that gripped him when he learned of his injury, the rejection of what he doesn't want and the stubborn insistence on what he does.

He goes out onto the porch. He hopes Will does not follow.

He dials the number from memory and hits *call.*

One beep. Another. Another.

Once the wait has grown too tiresome, the line disconnects.

Please, Hannibal types. No punctuation: the word hangs in the blank of a new thread, forlorn in the white space.

He is growing seasick again. The porch is swimming with shadows. It's nearly summer but the nights are still cold, and he is a bloodless thing now, easily affected. Carefully, he grips the railing and lowers himself to sit on the topmost step, pushing his foot out so it doesn't bend at the knee. His heel leaves a shallow trench in the ground as it slides forward.

The phone shivers in Hannibal's grip.

He stares at the dark line of text on screen, torn between disbelief and joy.

What are you asking for, Hannibal?

It is as though a fever has come onto him. He can't read what he's writing, his eyes gone blurry and useless with tears. *I need to see you,* he begs him. *Please.*

After everything, you still want to see me?

Yes. Please.

This isn't a fairy-tale, Hannibal. You come find me, he's gone. You can't have both. Do you understand that? He won't be there if you come back

The *if* doesn't escape Hannibal's notice.

I understand, he replies, though he understands very little.

Okay, the Other Will says.

Midnight, the woods behind the house

Say goodbye

And come

Say goodbye. Come.

Come.

The world tilts; rights itself.

Say goodbye

But to say goodbye would mean going back upstairs, and Hannibal cannot.

He doesn't know if he trusts the deceptive thing lying in wait in the upstairs bedroom, doesn't know if Will is the spider that coaxes him home with honeyed words only to stitch him limp and helpless. He doesn't know if he trusts himself—if he trusts his sudden fear of Will, if he trusts the way his mind is suturing the gaps in memory with doubt.

There is still an hour until midnight, but if Hannibal goes back upstairs, if he feels Will's warmth wrap its wet lips around him, he will never leave.

He considers going back inside to put on shoes. He doesn't think he'll be able to without Will's help. He stumbles upright, the edges of the world going dark as he does—that will be the iron deficiency from the blood loss. He imagines rich, fleshy meats dripping crimson, and the black dissipates.

He grips his crutches.

Say goodbye

And come

He is coming.

That is, of course, easier said than done. He has only just reached the plot of their garden, covered with fertilizer Hannibal does not remember laying, when he needs to stop and rest, seized by a stitch to the left of the liver. He wraps his fingers around the picket fence and imagines Will one day planting mint.

It will need to do for goodbye.

The woods breathe into him. Every step is a shock of cold. The wet earth catches between his toes. He does his best to avoid treading on cones and sharp pellets, but all he has to go by are the round moon and the distant light pollution from D.C. His phone has a flashlight built in, but he doesn't use it—it would eat right through what little remains of the battery.

The tether that runs from Hannibal's lungs to the house tightens but does not snap. The trees around him bear demon faces. Their arms are the Other Will's claws. Their eyes are the Other Will's wells. Every wheezing minute threatens to dispel the charm that lies over Wolf Trap, the sorcery of time and matter that keeps His Will suspended in life despite being out of balance—the further he treads into the Other Will's kingdom, the more His Will's kingdom crumbles.

The Other Will believes one or the other must fall. But Hannibal is disinterested in choosing between the stories others tell. He knows only what story he is telling now.

It is the story of a gamble, yes: but he'd rather risk losing Will than never knowing all of Will.

He falls once, catching himself on his forearms half a breath before his face digs into the forest floor. For a few minutes, he cannot stand back up. He needs a rest. Once his limbs have stopped shaking, he'll be able to will them into compliance.

He rolls over to gaze at the stars, glinting through the teeth of black leaves. There aren't very many visible: they're too close to D.C. In his woods back in Lithuania, there were *thousands.* The canopy was as thick as earth. Wolves scaled the land in search of their rabbits and bears slumbered under hills of flaky snow. How disappointed the Other Will must be that he cannot hunt him there.

He gets up. The black gnaws again at his field of vision. This time, no sumptuous visuals can vanquish it.

As he trudges on, he thinks about Will instead. Not the Other Will: that is where he is going, so there is no need. He thinks about His Will: his eyes, his neck, his mouth. The sweet disposition that takes hold of him in the evenings only to shatter into impatience come morning. How gentle his hands are when he helps Hannibal dress. The even beat of his heart when he sleeps and the way his throat swallows around words that he decides at the last moment not to say.

He is not sure how long he's been walking now. Is it midnight already? He doesn't know where he's going other than *deeper*: he supposes wherever he is, that is where he is meant to be as long as it is midnight when he gets there.

He is careful not to spend more than two heartbeats on thoughts that are not of Will. He is good at this now: he understands how to keep a dream alive when he is not there to see it. The Other Will doesn't know how much practice he's had, how proficient he has become. The Other Will, too, is of little faith.

Regardless. It might all be redundant. It might be that Hannibal is the dream. He hopes, then, grinning as more and more clarity deserts him, as the black teases at his lips, he hopes that Will does not forget to dream him.

He doesn't know when he starts talking. It might be after the second time he falls and gets up too quickly. It might be when he remembers Will gave him codeine before bed and it has obviously begun to take effect. It might be when he realizes he may never come out of this forest alive, and not because he'll die at the Other Will's hand but because the Other Will has left him to wander aimlessly until exposure catches up to him—how poetic, to walk into the woods to die.

'If you dream a dream too much,' he says to Will, 'do you risk giving it too much life? Can it become so real that it is more real than you are?'

Will says nothing. Hannibal understands this is because he is too far by now to hear him.

'Then the dreamer becomes the dreamed,' he adds unnecessarily; he imagines Will got that much.

'Do you think there are bears in this forest, Will?'

'No, Will, there aren't any in this part of the country, but we are no longer in this part of the country. We are in the Other Will's kingdom now, aren't we?'

He loses one of the crutches in a bush: it gets all tangled up and then he forgets he should have two. He hopes it is midnight. He hopes he is in the right place. He hopes that if not, the Other Will comes to find him.

He hopes the Other Will is real.

He focuses on the hopes, and the combined power of them is enough to spare him collapse. But if he should start thinking on his fears: that he's a fool, that he is wrong, that the bear will get him—

He doesn't dare.

And then he doesn't have to, because all at once he is stepping into a clearing, drunk swollen with moonlight—

And there he is.

Midnight.

Hannibal lacks the strength to reach him, so he lets himself fall forward to all fours, then to sit squarely, held up with palms that sink deep and wet into moss.

A forlorn figure has been cut into the night. His skin is pale, nearly translucent. A rifle is slung over his back, lying in wait between the sharp jut of shoulder blades. His forearms and neck are bare, but he is not naked like Hannibal remembers him. He has spent time in the land of the living now and learned the meaning of cold and warm.

When he turns to look at Hannibal, his face is nothing but shadow.

He doesn't appear to walk but glide: too fast and too slow for Hannibal's addled brain.

And then, all at once, he is on him: a hand on Hannibal's throat, a leaden weight over his hips. Hannibal's head is shoved into the earth, the smells of dew and night erupting around him like spring.

He doesn't remove the rifle from his shoulder, but then he doesn't need to. Hannibal is too weak to fight back—the Other Will won't need a thing except his hands and his teeth.

He wonders what happens now. He has lived out his dream: he is hobbled, weak, helpless, left at Will's mercy. In his dream, this is where Will leaves. But Hannibal has only just found him.

The Other Will's lips pull back in a snarl. His teeth glint. The darkness threatens to swallow Hannibal whole—his head met the ground too quickly for his arteries to correct for the position, and now there is too much blood in his inflamed legs and too little in his brain.

'Is this what you want from me?' Will growls. 'Is this what you want, Hannibal?'

Hannibal is struggling to breathe. The fingers around his throat loosen their hold just a fraction, just enough to let him wheeze out an answer,

'Is this what you want?'

Above him, backdropped by the moon and the dark of blood loss, Will blinks.

His mouth parts. His nostrils flare. His face is twisting in an expression that Hannibal *knows*.

He scrambles for the phone—it's there in his hand, which Will slams into the ground with an unyielding strength, but it's secure in Hannibal's grip now and he knows where to press for the flashlight to come on.

When it does, it blinds them both: what predators in the wild we are, Will.

And as Will blinks away the white, Hannibal finally sees his eyes.

They are, as always, a perfect summer blue.

*

End of Part One.

Chapter End Notes

I have been so eager to reach this final scene, you've no idea.

The first chapter of Part Two should arrive on schedule next week and will hopefully provide at least some of the answers you're probably waiting for. Beware increased angst and sassiness galore, because we are going back in time and we are changing POVs - and if you think Hannibal is the unhinged one, wait until you hear from Will Graham.

The Liar

Chapter Summary

> Over the course of his recovery at the hospital, Will tries to sort through what he is told by his visitors, real and imagined both.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PART TWO.

Chapter Twenty: The Liar.

The first thing Will remembers are his hands.

One evening—or night, or morning, or whatever else is left—he looks down at his hands and he curls the fingers, and he understands that it is him, Will, who is doing the curling, and that the hands are his to curl.

A needle distends the thin skin on his wrist. A tube runs from it, pumping something cold and alien into Will's remembered hands. The needle and the tube are not Will's. He tears them out, a voice somewhere howls like an animal trapped, and then he remembers the second thing: blood.

The third thing Will remembers is the man that stands over his bed, looming and dark and too real to feel real. He looks like Will looks, but his eyes are as dark and deep as anything, and his body is filled out around the sketch lines with the sort of flesh Will has seen on others, though not on himself.

'How much do you remember?'

Ever so carefully, Will uncurls three fingers. Alana taught him that.

'Three,' he says. It comes out as something else, not *three*—something long and nasal that means a different thing. 'My hands. Blood. You.'

The Other Will grins a grin that makes Will shuffle back into his pillows, and he says,

'That's all we need.'

Thing four, Will remembers when he sees for the first time Hannibal's face through the screen in the door. Their eyes meet. Will remembers nothing else of that day, neither what

Hannibal said nor what Will answered, nothing at all except thing four: that the man he sees in the door is a liar.

Things five through thirty are not real. They are ghost girls and lost boys and people he doesn't think he has ever been or has ever killed. It doesn't make him remember them any differently, so it takes real effort to hold in his mind remembered thing thirty-one: they're not real.

'Will, where are your slippers?'

'What?'

Hannibal's head peaks out from behind the mattress. He is hunched down on the floor, the claws of the dark that lives under the bed wrapped taut around his neck. If he were Will, he would risk being pulled under, but Hannibal doesn't feel the octopian binds. He doesn't see, either, the shadow that stands above him, a mockery of a guardian angel that mimics within a heartbeat every gesture and expression Hannibal makes. If you can't see them, they can't see you: and so, Hannibal can step into the room and remain unaffected.

'Do you know where your slippers are, Will?'

Will *does* know, but he bites his lip just as he is about to say so. If Hannibal wants Will's slippers, that means he wants him out of bed. Hannibal is taking him somewhere—he must have said but Will doesn't remember anymore—and that is never a good thing. The bathroom, maybe, where Will is always cold and where the light is always blinding. Or down the corridor to stretch his legs. Will doesn't like the corridor. It goes to places he doesn't know.

He reaches with his foot, poking with his big toe at the soft sole concealed under the sheets. He has taken to hiding the slippers whenever he can see Hannibal coming.

He tips his head back, which relaxes his throat and makes it easier to speak clearly, and says, 'No.'

'Hm. I can't find them under the bed.'

'The—uh—took them. Nurse.'

'A nurse took them?'

'Yes,' Will says, just as he remembers thing thirty-two: he remembers that he used to know how to lie.

Hannibal smiles. He is gorgeous when he smiles, which is a thing Will doesn't need to remember: it's pretty obvious.

'That is very serious.'

'I know.'

‘Do you know which nurse it was?’

‘It was dark.’

‘A robbery in the night. I can bring a new pair, but how are we to ensure that isn’t stolen next?’

Will shrugs. Hannibal asks him questions sometimes that Will doesn’t know the answers to.

‘How about a hiding place?’

The tendrils of darkness snapped clear off Hannibal when he rose and are now crawling instead on the mattress toward Will. He lifts his hands so they cannot be captured, but he can do precious little about his hip, his thigh, his leg. If he tries to scramble away, it will only incense them. He must pretend he does not see.

‘Will?’

‘Yeah. What?’

‘A hiding place for your slippers. Somewhere our thief won’t think to look.’

‘Okay.’

‘How about under your duvet?’

‘Okay.’

The black fingers startle back when Hannibal pulls the sheets off Will’s feet. There, between one and the other, rest the slippers. Will realizes he’s nearly forgotten again that’s where he’s put them.

Hannibal’s eyes crease with amusement. Will has a thought about that, but it’s difficult to catch at first in the buzz of the thirty-two things he has to remember—

‘I see you’re a step ahead of me,’ Hannibal praises, and then Will’s hand settles on the thought and *grips*.

‘Oh.’

‘What is it, Will?’

‘Thought of something.’

What he thought of was this: you can be a bad liar and still have your lie persist, as long as it makes Hannibal want to play along.

Will takes care to practice lying after that. It seems important: if he could lie, he might be able to answer questions he doesn’t know the answers to, and he might be able to make

Hannibal and the nurses, the doctors and Alana and everyone who comes in to interrogate Will on things that evade him—he might be able to make them happy.

He tells a nurse his head doesn't hurt when it does. He tells Hannibal he has never told him the story about the sharks in Chesapeake Bay even though he has, twice. He tells the woman who comes to visit him—Beverly, her name is Beverly, remember that—he tells her he knows who she is when he doesn't.

He tells Alana that he knows the things he sees at night are not real. He hopes it makes her feel better at least: the shadows that rise over his bed come dusk are bred in this room and in this room they will die, so any ignorance he can afford Alana cannot hurt her. The shadows will never follow her home. She should go and sleep deep.

Hannibal is different: he stays with Will well into the coming of night and he should remain cautious. His blindness affords him some protection, but the shadows have become familiar with him now, they lap at him and they nibble at his edges, they awake from the stupor they sometimes succumb to whenever he walks into the room. What happens if they decide they would not like him to leave again? If they can't cling onto him to stop his departure, could they choose to abandon Will to the night and follow Hannibal home instead?

'Don't smile now,' Will cautions him sometimes. 'Close your eyes. Don't—feet on the floor—they can touch you—bed. Get on the bed. Lights. Shh—don't quiet.'

Hannibal has the good sense to obey these fractured instructions. Eyes shut, he sits on the edge of Will's bed, he flicks off the bedside lamp, he toes off his shoes and lifts his feet up. In the silence of their breaths and the hum of the machines that keep Will from dipping again into a too-long sleep, they sit. Sometimes Will takes his hand. Other times, he tucks his hands under the sheets to resist the temptation, fearing the shadows might grow jealous.

Their attachment to Hannibal is no greater than their attachment to Will, of course—Will is sure he would never be allowed to leave the room for long, that he would be followed anywhere he went and dragged back screaming and bloody—but it is growing, evidenced most acutely by that one night when Hannibal isn't there.

Too afraid to risk reaching out and turning off the light, Will chooses to cover his eyes instead. If you can't see them, they can't see you. The coarse fabric of his sweater tickles at his cheeks. The sweater is his Christmas present. Will thinks Christmas might have been earlier today, but he isn't sure.

The shadows whisper above him. They run their dead hands down his limbs, but they cannot hurt him unless Will looks.

Then, he hears Hannibal's voice. He opens his eyes. It's a mistake.

Into Hannibal's absence, this thing has slid: a man but not, a shadow casting light, a premonition or a dream remembered. When Will looks at it more closely, he recognizes it as one of his familiar shadows only, but this shadow has had itself transformed, remoulded into Hannibal as it remembers it. When he smiles at Will, his mouth stretches wide and shows a set of pearly teeth that all glisten red with blood.

‘Hello, Will,’ the shadow says, parroting Hannibal’s inflection exactly. The teeth are wrong though. The eyes are too bright, the skin luminescent. The way he moves is jerky, joints bending the wrong way, abrupt and robotic like he is remote-controlled. ‘How are you feeling tonight?’

‘Terrified,’ Will says, though it comes out as something else. It doesn’t matter. With anyone else, Will would need to spend a while picking his words and double-checking they’re the right ones. Now, it is just them: Will and his shadows. ‘You made him all wrong. Are you blind?’

The not-Hannibal laughs. He leans over the bed, face inches from Will’s, and flutters his eyes: they are, Will sees now, two gouges of perfect black.

Will scrambles back, pierced with terror, but this is soon smothered by realization. If his shadows are indeed blind, then they can never see him. Will has no need to shield his eyes or turn off lights: they can taunt and touch, but they can never hurt.

‘How are you feeling, Will?’ the shadow repeats, face inches still from Will’s. Its mouth edges open—it looks ready to eat him.

‘Annoyed,’ Will says, braver now. ‘You’re spitting in my face.’

The not-Hannibal frowns. ‘Don’t be rude.’

‘Sit back then.’

He does. The mattress does not shift even an inch under his weight.

‘Hannibal’s coming back tomorrow,’ Will tries to reassure the shadow.

‘He’s missing our appointment,’ the shadow complains. ‘It’s your fault.’

‘My fault?’

‘You missed yours first.’

‘I missed my appointment?’

The shadow adopts again Hannibal’s tone, smiles Hannibal’s smile, and chides, ‘We had an appointment, Will.’

The word *appointment* doesn’t sound like a word anymore to Will, only a huff of sound.

‘How am I supposed to miss an appointment?’ Will asks, getting somehow the word *chair* in there, which would make the real Hannibal smile but doesn’t register with this one at all. ‘I’m always here.’

The shadow grins again, bright and crimson.

‘And why *are* you here, Will?’

Will worries his lip between his teeth. He is here because he has made a deal with the Other Will—that is the obvious answer. The shadow isn't looking for the obvious answer.

'Because—because I missed my appointment?'

'Very good,' not-Hannibal praises. 'You're never doing that again, are you?'

That much is true: he is here. He is not going anywhere unless Hannibal forces him to. He might try to hide himself as he did his slippers, but that would work only until Hannibal pulled the sheets back.

'I'm never doing that again,' he whispers. The certainty of it presses him into his bed like a leaden weight.

Sometime later, he pulls off the sweater and shoves it to the floor. The weight on him lessens enough to allow breath.

Something breaks for Will that night. He does not understand it: the doctors blame some new drug he is on, but he doubts that his shadows would care much about a drug. Yet their visits become less frequent. When they do come, they flicker in and out, a suggestion in the corners of Will's eye but never directly in front of him, a sense of presence only. Will does not celebrate. He comes to understand, over the course of days and nights he spends in this new silence, that there has been no victory and no departure. Instead, the shadows have come to live within him. The dark grips now not at his feet where they lie on the bed but directly at his heart, branching around the lungs, trapping words in his throat that he would like to say.

Where it was the shadows that sought Hannibal on nights previous, it is now Will who must stop himself reaching. He comes to understand why the shadows made the not-Hannibal all wrong—he sees him now as the shadows saw him then, teeth ready for sinking into flesh, eyes dark and caving, something inherently wrong in the way he moves and speaks. He appears to Will a terror, an uncanny thing born out of some error in the world, and Will must hide his eyes from him and ignore his presence. Will has given the shadows his own eyes—he sees Hannibal and Hannibal sees him—he can touch now and he can hurt both.

'You have a guest, Will.'

Will's eyes flutter shut on instinct, but the tread he hears is not Hannibal's tread. The footsteps fall heavy, decisive, unfamiliar.

The guest is a man: black, six-foot, late forties to early fifties, dressed like law enforcement trying to dress like they're not law enforcement. Will remembers seeing him before, though only faintly. Perhaps it was after Will first woke up. Those days were another life altogether.

'Will,' the man says. He has a low, booming voice that makes Will think of a memory he can't name. 'You're looking better.'

He takes the chair Hannibal sat in this morning and pulls it a little further from the bed. The way he moves, you might think Will was a child unused to company and still shy of big men.

It's patronizing, but it is also kind. That's a shorter word and a simpler concept, which makes it a much better fit for the limited space that's been cleared off in Will's mind.

'Want me to get you something from the vending machine? The usual?'

Will gives him a blank look. He can't think of a good lie when he has no idea what the man is talking about.

The man's expression drops. He looks to the side, bracing himself for more disappointment. When he shifts, his jacket distends over his chest. He's wearing an identification underneath.

Will is reaching before he realizes. 'Can I see?' he remembers to ask.

The card is warm from lying close against the man's body. The foil sucks at Will's fingers; they release with a sticky pop, leaving imprints. The photo beside the FBI lettering is grainy and unpleasant to look at. It seems that Jack doesn't like his picture taken. That's the name then: Jack Crawford, Head of the Behavioural Science Unit, FBI. Remember that.

Why is Jack Crawford, Head of the Behavioural Science Unit, FBI, *here*?

'I taught at Quantico,' Will tells him. 'Do you know if—what—if I was any good? Jack?'

Jack chuckles. 'Yeah. Honestly, I'm not the right person to ask—not like I wanted you for your teaching skills.'

Will looks up. 'What *did* you want me for?'

'What—how do you mean?'

That's alarm, right there between his eyebrows. It rises in Will in turn.

'We worked together at the FBI, Will. You remember that?'

'Yeah,' Will lies. 'I don't remember what we did. Not teaching?'

'I took you on as a consultant. A profiler. You helped us catch the bad guys, yeah? You were damn good at that, I can tell you as much. Do you remember?'

Oh.

The bodies, then, lying at his feet on the hospital floor when he wakes too early and dawn has not yet come: real.

The shadows around his bed, now in his chest: real. Not here, not now, but then. And, possibly, soon.

Hannibal with his teeth dripping blood—

The missed appointment.

‘It helps when you remember me. Re—remind me. Can you tell me—Jack. Can you tell me one other else?’

Jack nods. He’s excited to have a thing that he can do; it seeps into Will and intensifies until he can barely keep himself seated.

‘What happened to me. Can you tell me what happened before the—the place—here—’ He makes a sweeping gesture with his hand, frustrated when Jack takes much longer than Hannibal does to guess.

‘The hospital?’

‘Yes. How I get here?’

‘Right. Alright, well, I think what happened was—let me think. You were fine on Thursday, that’s when I saw you last. You were sick, for sure, anyone could see that, but we didn’t know it was serious, you know? Then Saturday, you collapsed in your house. Doctor Lecter found you in the middle of a seizure and he called an ambulance.’

It takes Will a beat to realize *Doctor Lecter* means Hannibal. He’s not good with last names.

‘Why?’

‘You were having a seizure—’

‘No, no. Why’s he in my house?’

Jack hesitates. ‘I think he said something about you missing an appointment.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know, I guess the night before or—’

Will yanks open the drawer in the nightstand. From within, he pulls the picture of his dogs. He flips it over and pushes it into Jack’s hand.

‘Write the date.’

Jack turns the picture back over. His mouth twitches in half-smile, half-wanting. He gets up, circles the bed, and replaces the picture carefully into the drawer.

He pulls a notepad and a fountain pen out of his jacket instead. The pages are flimsy and lined, which means Will is going to have an easier job tearing it by accident, but he’ll also follow the writing better.

‘Numbers,’ he instructs Jack. ‘Then letters. Capitals.’

‘Sure, Will.’

He makes the letters large and simple the way Hannibal can never manage. Will can read them fine, even if he doesn't understand what they mean put together.

'Saturday, December 6th,' Jack says. 'That's the day you had the seizure.'

Will nods. 'December—'

'December 6th.'

'Yeah.'

Jack helps him fold the paper and tuck it into the pocket on his robe.

After that, he gets them each a can of coke. Will drinks half of his before he chokes.

'I'm fine,' he croaks from between the arms of the nurse who's run in to help. His lungs are burning. If Jack were Hannibal or Alana, he wouldn't bother reassuring him, but he isn't, so Will supposes he might as well. 'I'm not that easy to kill.'

Jack waits until the nurse is out of the room. Then, he collects himself and says, fixing Will with a look that quickly becomes too much to bear,

'I want to thank you for that before I go, Will. For living through this. For waking up. For getting better.'

Will looks at his hands. He feels like he might start crying. He doesn't want to, not in front of this stranger—but then, he wants to cry *because* Jack is a stranger.

'I see a lot of death every day. I see it at work. I see it at home. I know you don't remember it, but I—I would feel like it would be on me if you didn't make it. Thank you for making it. For not dying on me.'

'Sure, Jack,' Will says.

That night, an idea comes to him as he watches dawn through the slits in the shutters.

He calls for the nurse.

He gives her his phone.

'This is just because I'm having a slow shift,' she cautions. Will suspects she is delineating this boundary for herself more than for him. 'Alright, let me have a look. Which one is he? The doctor, yeah?'

'Yeah.'

She settles in the chair. The blue light from the screen paints her features a ghostly shade. Will has to look down at his hands to stop the associations fast forming at the edges of his vision.

‘And then you’ll try to get some more sleep, okay?’

‘Okay.’

Absolved of guilt, the nurse now digs in with unrestrained glee. Will can feel it lighting up the very tips of his fingers.

‘All the way from the start?’

Will really only cares about any texts immediately preceding December 6th, but it would be a lie to say he isn’t curious. It’s at least another two hours before Hannibal brings him breakfast —that’s what the nurse said, and she showed him the time on her digital watch, too. Two hours sounds like enough time for curiosity.

‘Yeah.’

The first few texts are all addresses and dates that Will cannot hold in his mind long enough to understand. He dozes off a little as they dredge through these. He dreams that he is picking gleaming red berries from bushes glazed with snow, his feet bare on the frosted ground.

‘They moved Abigail two doors down to 324.’

Will focuses. ‘What?’

The nurse reads it again, and then the *thank you, Will* that Hannibal sent back.

‘It sounds like she was at a hospital,’ the nurse says. ‘He’s asking you here if you’ll be there Wednesday—do you know an Abigail?’

Yes. Will knows an Abigail, though he doesn’t know for sure whether he remembers an Abigail. It is easier to conjure her face than it is to recall the name of the nurse, which does make it feel as though it’s been ingrained somewhere deeper, in the place he doesn’t have access to. But who knows?

He is filled suddenly with a panic so heady it’s like he’s bleeding again, only his wrists stay white.

‘Skip that,’ he orders sharply. ‘Go to the end.’

‘How about some water?’

Will shakes his head. He hates water. You have to swallow water.

‘Okay. Here we go. The last text I have here, you wrote—*I have to cancel our session next Tuesday 12/9.*’

The appointment.

‘That’s—what date?’

‘Tuesday, December 9th. You sent it on the 5th.’

‘That’s—uhm.’ Will feels at his robe. It isn’t so much that he reads Jack’s blocky writing—the sight of the paper alone reminds him of the sound Jack’s mouth made. ‘That’s after December 6th?’

‘The 5th is the day before. That’s when you sent the text, see? But you were cancelling the session on the 9th, which is three days after the 6th. That alright?’

It is and then it isn’t. Will scrambles for the numbers that scatter and reassemble and scatter again, until he thinks he does have a sense of them—a sense, at least, that he never missed an appointment the night before. He was *going* to miss an appointment.

Why?

And why should it matter?

Will tries to read the answer in Hannibal’s face. He feels for it in the way Hannibal’s hands touch and guide him. He pays particular attention to the stories Hannibal tells, but he never hears what he wants to hear. The real Hannibal is nowhere near as forthcoming as the terror the night conjured, and even that spoke only in riddles.

He has refused to speak with Hannibal in fear of the shadows brewing in him, but if what Jack Crawford, Head of the Behavioural Science Unit, FBI, has said is true, there might be more shadows without than within. It is the lesser risk to talk to Hannibal than it is to sit idle and receive no answers.

‘Shall we talk again today, Will?’

‘Sure.’

Hannibal smiles. He likes it better now that Will has emerged from muteness.

But Will cannot simply ask him about the appointment. He struggles to put into words the reason—he struggles to put into words much of anything—only feels as though to ask would be to tear down the lie. This lie stretches between them like a fine piece of cloth, making all shapes appear soft and all edges smooth. Four: Hannibal is a liar. Will is more petrified at the prospect of hurting this lie perhaps than he is at the prospect of hurting Hannibal—it wakes him in the night, gasping and cold with sweat.

‘What do you want?’ Will asks as Hannibal props him up the bed to sit. Will’s hair, newly cut, feels odd under Hannibal’s fingers when he smooths out the strands on Will’s neck.

‘What do I want to talk about?’

‘Sure.’

‘Maybe you could choose.’

Will considers this. He doesn't much like being made to choose. 'Tell me again about the ghost.'

'Which ghost, Will?'

'Your sister's ghost.'

A shadow moves over Hannibal's features. For the split of a second, Will sees the thing he fears: the tear in the lie, the hole that will gape wider the more he fingers at it. He is about to hide his face in his hands, whether to not see through to the other side or to keep the shadows from seeing Hannibal, or maybe to stop Hannibal seeing him—when the illusion passes, the lie reasserts, and Hannibal is only himself again.

'You mean the ghost of my ancestor, nibbling at the bread we left for it,' he corrects Will, 'that showed itself to me on the Eve of All Saints' Day when I was a boy. My sister was still alive at the time.'

'You're telling it wrong.'

'I am not telling it wrong, Will.'

'Fine,' Will sighs, not wanting to argue but annoyed with his stubbornness. 'Do it like—me—this way. Let's. She can be both.'

'Both what, Will?'

The glint in Hannibal's eye tells Will that he knows very well both what, only wants Will to find the right words to say it.

'Dead and—,' he stutters, 'she—she can be—dead and alive both.'

A thought strikes him, and he puts a hand over his heart to reassure himself it is beating.

'You want me to tell the story so she is dead and alive both.'

'Yeah. Like me.'

He catches exactly the moment Hannibal's impassive face softens.

'Like you,' he confirms.

Hannibal tells him the story. It does not reveal to Will anything of what he wants to know.

In the story, no one except Hannibal can see the not-ghost of his sister; this pleases Hannibal, Will imagines, because why would he ever share the sight? Will wonders whether the nurse who comes in to take his temperature can see him or if she sees only the tubes running from him and where the sheets crease. Is this why Hannibal doesn't like the nurses doing things for Will? Because he does not want them to glimpse even the traces that Will leaves in the world?

‘All good,’ the nurse says to Hannibal. She doesn’t look at Will. ‘I’ve heard they’ll be sending him home soon?’

‘So we hope.’

‘You got someone to take care of him?’ This question, she only whispers. Will can’t understand why until he feels Hannibal’s breath on his cheek, sheets shifting higher to cover him—he must have closed his eyes as he listened to the story. The nurse can’t see Will and Will can’t see the nurse.

‘We’re still looking.’

If they cannot find whoever it is they’re looking for, does that mean Will goes home never? He doesn’t want to. He remembers home only as a smear of light over a dark so deep you know there’s no end to it. Like a well, the sort Hannibal would have liked to fall into as a child.

Will feels like he is sat at the bottom of a well sometimes. If he is, then Hannibal is the one filling the bucket every day with food and drink, to lower carefully into the well so as not to strike Will on the head. But Will rather suspects if he tried to clutch onto the rope and climb up, Hannibal would yank it from his grip and seal the lid shut.

‘I can give you some names if you like. He can’t be left on his own, yeah?’

‘Of course not.’

Of course not. It is in Will’s best interest to stay in the well and eat from the bucket. That’s a story, he thinks.

When the door shuts softly after the nurse, he opens his mouth to share it with Hannibal, but the words die in his throat, constricted all at once by fear.

This is one story he isn’t so sure Hannibal would like to hear.

Chapter End Notes

I happened to have had some extra time this week and have got the next chapter done and ready for posting. So, you're getting two chapters today, because why not!

The Revenant

Chapter Summary

Will gets an idea of where the Other Will might be hiding.

Chapter Notes

This is the second chapter I'm posting today. Make sure you read Chapter 20 first!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-One: The Revenant.

The air is mild and wet today. It sticks to the back of Will's neck and makes his clothes lie oddly against skin. The discomfort builds and builds in his chest—it is so awful now that he is breathing in gasps and has to kick at the floor.

'Is everything alright, Will?'

'Fine. Not that one.'

Alana sets the cutting board down. The wet is in her hair, too. Will would prefer the whole of the weather froze over for good; this in-between is only setting frost in his bones.

'That's for meat,' Will tells her. 'Other one—yeah.'

Alana told him he would feel better once he was home. Wolf Trap does not feel like home. It feels instead like an enormous riddle that Will had set for himself back before he was *this* Will. He has yet to solve the myriad of its puzzles, but he has made progress: he knows, for instance, what the different utensils in the kitchen are meant for, and he knows which panels in the floor hiss loudest.

That is not to say it didn't do him good to come back. He's begun to remember. Last night, Hannibal spent an hour looking for the blue sheets because it occurred to Will he had blue sheets and that he liked them.

The blue sheets are real enough. They're sitting on his bed even now.

Once lunch is ready, Will helps Alana carry it over to the table. She takes his seat. Will tries not to show how much this bothers him.

Hannibal's chair feels wrong against his back.

Hannibal would tell Alana where everyone is meant to sit. Hannibal isn't here. He's—somewhere. He's told Will where he was going at least twice, but fuck if Will remembers anything more vital than the colour of his favourite sheets.

'Where's Hannibal?' He sounds like a child.

'He's in Baltimore.' Alana gives him a smile, compassionate but not in a sticky way. 'He had to pick up some things from home, and I think he said he was going to see his therapist.'

Right. New slippers and the therapist, that was it. Well, God knows Hannibal needs both.

'He'll be back soon,' Alana reassures, and that *is* sticky. 'Hannibal's been taking good care of you, hasn't he?'

He has. Will hates it. Hannibal takes equally good care of him when Will is appreciative and when Will gives in to his newfound compulsion to humiliate. He fights it, he does, but he loses in the end because it just feels so *good*. Any time he glances over to the bulky old mattress Hannibal obediently lies down on every evening, Will feels such a heady influx of power he gets dizzy with it.

He understands intellectually that it is not Hannibal's fault that he is healthy and Will is not, or that he can keep track of what time it is and Will forgets the days of the week. It is not Hannibal's fault Will can't make it through a single night without him. But there's a burning upset deep in him that refuses to die down; it doesn't belong to Will because he doesn't understand it, but it *does* belong to Will more than anything else and it is understood not with words but with hands and the thrum of his pulse, and with the dreams he dreams at night.

'I'm worried he's going to burn out,' Alana muses. She does at times take the tone with him that an adult might take with a child, but Will doesn't think she's conscious of it; usually, she takes care not to dumb down anything she says. He likes that about her, this trying to make him feel like he's no different than anyone else, even if it sometimes means he can't quite follow. It's refreshing: Hannibal doesn't bother with any of that. But then Hannibal has a way of making it seem like he's talking down to Will not because he is slow, but because he is *special.* It makes his stomach warm and his spine tingle. It's infuriating.

'This is the first time he's been away in weeks. He's stopped working, he's acting deaf whenever I mention hiring a care worker. He's always been a very sociable person, you know—I've never seen him this isolated. I don't know. How does he seem to you?'

Will shrugs. Hannibal seems to him, primarily, obsessive. He also seems painfully depressed. It would stoke the fires of fury in Will's chest if it wasn't so pathetic.

'Not like I'm keeping him locked up,' he observes, proud with himself when it comes out right.

'I know that, Will.' She taps her fork on the wood as though to stress the point. 'This is very good.'

Will doesn't yet have all his taste back, but he nods his agreement.

'I'm worried there's some misplaced blame at play,' Alana says around her next bite. Will envies her the hunger. 'You know he took you to the hospital a few weeks before you collapsed?'

Will didn't know that, but then the fire in his chest roars higher at the mention—so maybe he did know that.

'They ran all the standard tests, but they didn't find anything. I don't know, maybe it was an oversight, or maybe the illness was at an early enough stage—'

'What are stands—normal—standard tests?'

'Oh, I'm not sure. A brain scan, blood tests, probably a spinal tap. They sent over all the results to your doctor when you were admitted, Hannibal and I looked at some of them. All clean.'

There's a long word Will knows. 'Patient confidentiality,' he enunciates carefully. It makes him cough. 'Either of you heard of that?'

Alana looks halfway to embarrassed.

'I'm sorry. I imagine that if I were in your place, I would be feeling quite powerless. Is that accurate?'

Powerless seems, at times, entirely understating it.

'Did any more memories start coming back?'

'No,' Will lies. He sounds more convincing every time.

Alana reaches to cover his hand with her own. He doesn't much like to be touched unless it's by one of the dogs—it feels too dangerous and he is already in plenty danger without—but he pushes through the spike of anxiety. Alana's hand is warm and smooth and sticky. The longer it's there, the more the anger in Will eases, until the faintest breeze could take it out.

Yet no such breeze comes, and the embers stay hot as stone in the sun.

His eyes droop heavy after they've finished eating. He tries to nap, but the sun through the window is too strong and his skin itches. He needs a change of clothes. He's not sure how to go about that and he doesn't want to ask Alana. He would have asked her back at the hospital, but he's grown too used to it being just Hannibal now.

He considers dragging Winston into bed with him. Too bad there are rules. Too bad he remembers as much.

When he forces his eyes shut, he sees Hannibal's house. It helps soothe the childish fear that an absence from sight equals an absence from existence. Will's hospital bed is there, and Hannibal's creaky plastic chair, and he so misses the days when he couldn't hold in his mind

more than one thought at a time—and Will follows Hannibal through empty room after empty room, hunting for slippers.

The floors in Hannibal's house don't creak. When Will looks down, he sees they're not floors at all but sand. Is he expecting a flood, Will wonders? Or is the sand in case Will bleeds? He checks just in case: his wrists are white.

They find the slippers in the kitchen. They sit on the pristine island that looks like a surgical table more than it does a place for making meals. Strangely, the sight of it alone makes Will sick.

He opens a drawer in the kitchen cabinet. The disturbed blood within spills down the sides. It's pomegranate dark.

Will fixes his eyes on his reflection in the pool. The face blinking back at him isn't his own.

'What does he look like?' he asked Hannibal one morning, the shutters on his hospital room pulled all the way down because he was having a headache. It hurt to speak, to move, to swallow.

Hannibal leaned in and spoke in a murmur, watching Will's face for signs of pain. 'I have told you already, Will. Do you remember?'

'Tell me again.'

'He looks like you.'

'Where?'

Hannibal had to lean in further to catch the question, brows furrowing as his brain replayed the faint exaltation and searched it for meaning.

'Where, Will? Where is he now?'

Will tried to give a nod, but that sent such a jolt of hurt up his neck that he had to bite down on his lip hard, hard until he tasted blood.

'Try not to move,' a voice above him advised gently.

'No shit.'

'I'm not sure where he is now. Where do you think he would have gone?'

'My house?'

Hannibal hummed. 'Maybe. But I was there the other day and didn't see him.'

'Your house?' This one actually made more sense to Will: the Other Will was Hannibal's story.

A chuckle. ‘I haven’t seen him there either, Will.’

But Hannibal hasn’t been to his house in weeks.

Will rouses himself from his half-sleep. He feels at the blue sheets beneath his body. He listens to the hushed tones Alana uses to converse with the dogs. He tries to remember that the Other Will isn’t all the way real and cannot possibly have been camping out at Hannibal’s house; tries to convince himself this sudden conviction is merely the mistimed effort of a brain struggling to remake synapses where they have been burnt away.

It does not work. Will is helpless against his convictions.

When Hannibal returns having forgotten his slippers, Will tells him,

‘Let’s go now,’ and it’s not the slippers he is after when he does.

On the car ride to Baltimore, the greying roads rushing outside the window in a blur of gloom, Will considers telling Hannibal they aren’t really going to pick up his forgotten slippers. He considers saying something like, *the Other Will probably took them,* and then Hannibal would ask, *took what?* and laugh when Will said *the slippers.* For Hannibal, the Other Will is only a story and so such things strike him as funny rather than dreadful; curious rather than dangerous.

The house doesn’t resemble at all what Will has imagined. Where are the woods, encapsulating the mortar, thrashing their branches against windows in protest of being denied entry? Where is the creaky hospital chair and where is the blood, where are Will’s soiled sheets and the beeping of equipment, where are the needles strewn across counters and the footprints in crimson-speckled sand?

Instead, the house is ornate and grand like a haunted mansion, only there is nothing haunting it. The dark corners are too clean for anything to dwell within them; the smell of floor polish and stale air kill any sense of timelessness. In Hannibal’s bedroom, a samurai armour stands guard over his sleep, but it is poor protection: no matter how long Will stares at it, it refuses to budge an inch, refuses to grow eyes or intention.

Will feels at the wall of the bedroom and finds it cold. There is a minute tremble in it, the dying struggles of a fraying beat: the last of the house’s lifeblood making its way up in a failing bid to warm them. Even in his jacket, Will shivers.

He has not seen sign of the Other Will anywhere. If he is to be found here, he will be at the source of the lingering blood flow: he will be the parasite sucked right onto the heart.

‘I want jello,’ he tells Hannibal.

Once he has managed to send him away on this pointless errand, Will begins in earnest.

He opens, first, every drawer in the kitchen. When this yields no blood and no clues, he makes his way to the study, to the bathroom, up the stairs and back again. He confirms for himself room after room empty. This does not frustrate Will, which is surprising: most things

do. But the house is a riddle, a labyrinthine organism that deceives Will into losing his way and walking into the same room again and again, and riddles are by design not meant to reveal all their secrets at once.

Every failure instead increases Will's conviction, and it grows in him his dread. He shucks his shoes at one point, aware at once of the painful thuds he is making to announce his presence. If the Other Will is here, Will would rather have at least the advantage of surprise.

Finally, Will plants both his hands on the wall, closes his eyes and breathes. Slowly, attentively, he begins the work of tracing the thrum back to its source. It leads him past the dim corridors with their gilded frames and past the kitchen with its excess of steel, drawers thrust open; through a door to the pantry and then another leading down a winding stairway that disappears into black. He has the strangest sense that this is a door that is not meant to be walked through: there is no key in the lock, but the lock is rather more than what you would ordinarily put on a door, a hefty thing with two bolts that would do just fine stopping anyone but an accomplished burglar—if it was locked. It is not.

An invitation, Will decides. Very likely the wisest thing would be to refuse it: if the Other is down there, then Will should lock him in. Hannibal will have the key somewhere; Will could push his back against the door and contain the Other until he gets back.

He won't, though.

His footsteps echo on the steps. There seem to be more than remotely possible, but then there usually do because Will needs to balance himself with care and because he runs out of breath halfway. It's dark, so he must trust his feet alone to feel at the edge of each step before he braves it. There should have been a light switch. Will forgot to check for it and coming back up to the top strikes him as worse.

The sound his foot makes on the cool stone when he reaches the bottom is a coin thrown into a well. Will is fast getting tired of this metaphor. He palms at the wall and flicks on the lights.

Blue-tinted LEDs blast through the room, blinding.

Worse than what he sees—worse than the table, the saw, the various implements and scalpels and the clean—clean—*too clean*—worse than that is what he remembers: this. He remembers the table and the saw and the implements. Not these ones, not exactly, but he remembers the bodies these would have been used on, he remembers the deep gashes and the crusty blood between his fingers and—

Worse than that. Worse than all of that: he doesn't feel a single ounce of shock.

He should be staggered. He should be running, and collapsing, and he should be horrified, because whatever he suspected, he'd never for a moment thought—this isn't the Hannibal he knows. This is someone else. Maybe that is why he isn't yet afraid.

He isn't staggered because he realizes—and that *is* staggering, that stops his breath in a scream that won't come out—he realizes he has known all along.

Worse than Hannibal's deception is his own. In all their hospital visitations, not one figment of his psyche bothered to tell him he was letting a killer into his home.

On legs trembling, Will walks. He glides his fingers over the surface of the surgical table at the centre of the room. He knocks out of alignment a metal tray housing scalpels. He takes in the sight of the bone saw hanging off the wall the way one might take in a work of art at a museum: committing to memory at once every detail and the scope of the feeling at large.

The cabinets house more tools: drills, scissors, hooks, suction tubes and staplers. The combined gleam of them, cold and silver like the beginnings of a migraine, make Will blink and narrow his eyes. What would it feel like to have them used on his own flesh? Probably the way the ghost of them feels now: threading phantom pain across Will's chest, conjuring the grind of bone into his ears, breath hitching as he imagines Hannibal's hands pinning him to the table. It wouldn't matter how much Will struggled—he would feel them all, one after the other, if Hannibal so wished.

One of the cabinets is unlike the rest. Instead of the terror of dead metal, it holds the deceptive promise of a reprieve from pain: paper. Will thumbs through sketches of men and women splayed open. He runs the pads of his fingers over deeds and letters written in languages he cannot read. To the back are set wads of cash: American and Canadian dollars, peso and euro and bills adorned with script Will cannot decipher. Next to these are the passports, different names, different countries. Hannibal's photograph looks up at Will from the first page of some, and Abigail's features stand out glossy on others.

Maybe they have never been Hannibal or Abigail.

Maybe the foreign names, sounding odd and manufactured as Will whispers them, are in fact theirs—Will doesn't know. Maybe Hannibal is not Hannibal at all, maybe a bed isn't a bed and the sky isn't the sky, maybe all of these are lies Will has been told. Maybe if he keeps looking through the stash of counterfeit passports, he is going to find one bearing his face and discover he has been lied to about who he is, too.

All of this has been kept from him. All of this he has kept from himself. A dark absence, a lightless drop, rises in him and erases thought—did the figments of his psyche keep all this from him because they knew he was special, like Hannibal does? Because they knew Will was the kind of special that couldn't *do* anything about it, even if he knew?

And then Will tastes him.

A bitter note on his tongue, a sudden caving in his chest, a drop like he's going down on a swing, swallowed at last by gravity—he has scarcely the time to turn before there is a hand on his shoulder, nails biting, too-hard and too-deep, and he sees the reflection of his dark face in the polished steel of the sink—

The next thing he remembers that day is Hannibal pinning him down to the bed. One of Hannibal's hands is on the back of his neck, splayed fingers teasing at where pain pulsates from Will's shoulder still, from where long, dirty nails drove in—Will doesn't remember how he got here and he doesn't remember what the syringe is for, and he wants to beg Hannibal to

explain, he wants all of this to *stop* just for a second, wants to ask for reprieve. All he can do is scream.

It feels good to scream, in a twisted, sickening, upside-down and downside-out way. His throat burns with it, his lungs ache with it. He bucks more under Hannibal's weight, wanting to bruise on each point of contact, wanting more pain and longer pain: a palpable proof of his helplessness.

He won't go to the bath today. Hannibal doesn't insist. Does he know like Will does that this would inevitably end in disaster? Does he know that if Will gets naked tonight, he will shiver himself into an early death? That if his bare skin touches water, he will be drowned?

'Let's get you changed at least.'

Will doesn't want that either, but neither does he want to be pinned and forced again. He shuts his eyes and lets Hannibal pull down his pants, ease off his socks, prise his head from the shirt's clutch.

'What's this here?'

Will looks. Four round bruises mark the white of his left shoulder. Raw, angry skin stands out where the point of the nail would have driven in.

'We'll put some ointment on it. Does it hurt?'

Will laughs. He can feel Hannibal's concerned gaze on him, bearing down like a weight, and he knows he should stop himself because Hannibal does not want him to laugh like a madman—he is mad, yes, but only in the gentlest way where he gets lost in his days and forgets his big words. He is not supposed to be the madman who meets revenants in basements and lets himself be marked with their dirty claws.

'Will—'

Will buries his face in the pillow, laughing still, the fingers of one hand pulling at hair to try and stave it off, the other secure over his scarred shoulder.

'I can give you something for the pain if it's bothering you, Will,' Hannibal says, sounding so utterly confused that it only makes Will laugh more. 'Does it hurt very much?'

Of course it hurts.

When Hannibal is in the shower that night, Will steals an old knife from the kitchen cabinet. Hannibal never uses the knives from this set because they belonged to the old Will and Hannibal has since brought over his preferred Japanese brand. He spends a while searching for a good hiding spot, and finally crawls under the bed and cuts a narrow opening into the mattress, just wide enough for the knife to slip inside. It isn't exactly in easy reach, but if he rolls himself under the bed in the middle of a struggle, perhaps the element of surprise will give him enough time to act.

It won't. No struggle will ever come to fruition. Will can barely walk up the stairs; if either Hannibal or the revenant living in his basement want to hurt him, they will be able to do so with one hand behind their back.

That night, he lies awake for hours. He has learnt to tell apart everyone's breath: he knows the whistle of Betty's nose, the gurgling exhale that comes out of Buster, the rhythmic snore that shakes Chip. He knows Hannibal's breath, too. It's so soft it is inaudible when he's still awake enough to control it, but once he has fallen into sleep, it picks up. Sometimes he'll make a fussy sound, small and aborted, before rolling over. Every time he does, Will's hands fist on the sheets. It is, by now, perfectly Pavlovian.

Tonight, there are no fussy sounds. There is perfect silence and then there is muffled crying. Will keeps his hands flat on the mattress. It feels as though the bones in his fingers might snap.

He has upset him today. Demolishing the kitchen, which Will doesn't remember doing but supposes he must have done because Hannibal said so, breaking into hysteria, staying mute and loose-limbed and drifting—he has upset him. The knife won't do Will any good, but he has this one defence at least: as long as he is what Hannibal wants and as long as Hannibal wants what that is, he is safe.

It is enough for tonight and enough for tomorrow, but it isn't sustainable.

Will conjures the clean smell of the basement. He feels at the sheets at his sides and imagines he is feeling metal. He remembers the face he saw, the outlines and the filling of him, distorted by the curve of the reflective surface.

He lays a hand on his four finger-bruises and presses down, and into the pain and the dark of his eyelids he summons the shape of him: the curl of his hair, the line of his jaw. Just an inch shorter than Will is, naked except for the bearskin thrown over his back, dark-eyed and strong and wild—he can almost hear Hannibal's voice as he paints the picture for him. Even the most perverted fragments of Will's shattered self are, it seems, of Hannibal's making.

Once the Other Will is standing real enough to be touched, Will speaks to him.

'I need to remember,' he says. 'I know you do. I need to know what happened to me.'

'You know what happened to you. You led me out of the woods.'

'Before that—I cancelled the appointment.'

'Who told you that?'

'Hannibal,' Will says. 'In my mind.'

'He's got a big mouth, this Hannibal in your mind.' The Other Will stretches; the fur slips down his shoulder, exposing skin that's covered in goosebumps. 'You understand why I didn't want you to find out so soon? You barely know left from right. It's done now, I guess —all that's left is deciding what you're going to do about it.'

There is nothing Will can do about it.

The Other Will reads the thought in him. He smiles. It's the sort of smile Will didn't think himself capable of, a cruel twisted thing that bites into cheeks—but he's mirroring it already, with his real body resting heavy in his real bed.

'You'd be surprised,' the Other Will says. 'Sleep. I'll put it in the drawer for you.'

He tugs at the brass handle. The nightstand drawer slides open easy. No blood in this one.

Inside, he deposits something long and slithering, with an end that glints in the light of the moon. It occurs to Will at first it might be a snake, but it's a pendant. On the leather string hangs a pointed tooth, too big to be human.

'Sleep,' the Other Will repeats, and Will sleeps.

When he wakes in the morning, the very first thing he does is roll over and pull the drawer open.

There is no pendant. There are papers inside, a packet of Advil and an old tissue.

And then, Will remembers.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, Will recovers an important memory.

Thank you for reading!

The Memory

Chapter Summary

Will Graham is getting close, although whether to death, insanity or the Ripper, he's not quite sure.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Memory.

He is close.

Winston comes over to whine; Will Graham drops his free hand so he can nuzzle into it. He's been anxious all day, whether because he misses the rest of the pack—away at Alana's for the time being—or because he can tell, in the way dogs can tell such things, that Will is close.

When he wakes into his dreams these days, Will wakes in the middle of the dense woods, and the first thing he sees is the flash of antlers, black and slick. He runs after the monster, leaping over boulders and deep-etched roots, over cracks in the earth that open for his legs and scream their welcomes, and he gets close and closer. And then, he reaches with his hand to clutch the monster's arm, to pull it back and around to face him—but that one inch, that tiny breath is like a gaping hole, and his fingers close on air.

Will drops back on the pillows. He moved over to the bed when he realized he was in danger of losing consciousness again. Earlier this morning, he knocked a bump into the side of his head that's still thrumming pain, the muffled kind that pushes straight through the Advil. Lying flat on his back seems to be helping, if only just. Only just is all he needs: he is close.

His shoulder moans displeasure when he lifts the photograph into his line of vision. It's one of the Ripper's latest, a man sat in a church pew with his tongue pressed between the pages of a Bible. What's he done to you, Will contemplates through a yawn. He'd thought once the Ripper was passing judgement, but that's not it at all, he decides today. Judgement implies a breach of some sort of code; the Ripper's too flaky for an honest-to-God code. The code changes depending on what he's had for breakfast. No, this is offense, bright and brilliant.

What's this man done? Bad-mouthed God? Is the Ripper a religious man?

'Unless you're the God,' Will whispers, then laughs. With every hour, he sounds more and more like a madman. 'What did this guy say to you?'

The Ripper, who is not in the room, does not answer.

‘That’s all it was, wasn’t it? He said something to you. You really got nothing better to be doing with your time?’

He’s close. He can feel it. He needs only this final act, this final victory, and then that can be it.

‘You don’t know anyone who might have the Ripper’s number, huh?’ he asks Winston, who cocks his head in attention. ‘Would be so much easier if I could call and place a request for a quick murder. I feel like one more scene and I’d have him, you know? I need one more.’

He’s been staring at old Ripper files for weeks. He knows them by heart. He is close.

But he is close to something else, too, and if the Ripper doesn’t hurry with his next move, Will might not be around to see it.

The resignation is strange. Will is entirely convinced it’s a symptom: it shouldn’t be this easy to accept the notion of impending death. He should be flailing and kicking—so maybe he isn’t dying at all, maybe he is only going insane and that’s how his delusion has decided to frame itself: the death of the man he is to make room for the man he has always feared he would become.

He understands Doctor Lecter’s neurologist friend could have been wrong. A single brain scan and a single doctor’s eye mean little, Will knows—he has three vets on speed dial just so he can always get a second opinion. It’s only that if there is something wrong with his body, it is something *seriously* wrong, acute, chronic, stage four—terminal. And then once Will knows, he’s going to have to deal with that, with tests and with treatment options and with knowing. Not knowing is easier. Not knowing means there is nothing he can do. He isn’t sure he has the strength in him to handle anything else.

Will is tired. The house is a mess and he is a mess. He needs to wash. He needs to figure out what’s wrong with his body or his mind, he needs to find the killer behind the D.C. murders, he needs to check on the dogs at Alana’s. He needs to eat, probably. If he died, someone else would do all that for him.

When he shuts his eyes, he imagines his corpse, gone blue and cold, and the heavy heat of hands on him: washing off grime, dressing the scratches and cuts, shaving him clean. Laying him in the silk bed at the bottom of a coffin. They’d put him in a suit, likely; he’d prefer pyjamas.

And then there’s the money. Will makes money but he doesn’t spend money, which is one thing he should probably be talking through in therapy—well, if he kicks it, the money can go do something useful with itself. He’s put Abigail down in his will for everything. She’s not going to like it, but he hopes her animosity for a dead man will lose out against the prospect of that little bit of independence. It’ll get her started at least. He fails to imagine what getting started might look like, for her. Does she want to go to college? What’s she interested in? Fuck if Will knows.

He’s leaving the dogs to Alana. She has friends with little kids. Betty would like a family with kids, she’d just lost her pups when Will got her. Chip, too, will make some hyperactive

brat out there very happy. Winston is going to Jack, if he'll have him. Will has tested the waters and found Jack's been thinking of getting a dog for his wife to help with the pain. Winston's good at that: Will has thoroughly verified as much.

He's leaving Alana some of his books, too. He's set them all up on one shelf and written a thank-you note for sorting out the dogs. She'll hopefully find it regardless of whether he's taken to a morgue or a facility.

He thought about leaving something for Doctor Lecter. He thought about writing him a letter to the point of, *just go into the house and take whatever you want,* but that seemed rude. He even tried to assemble some of his old records: assessments by various psychiatrists, his own notes on empathy disorders, fragments of old journals and essays. Would Doctor Lecter be offended or pleased to be handed Will's brain on a platter at long last? *There, you can publish that if you like.* That's equally awful, isn't it? *You can publish it all. Go through my laptop. Here's the password. Here's the code to my phone. Maybe you want to see the elusive Will Graham brain up close, would that help? Cut my head right open if you want to.*

He still hasn't written the letter. It's a bad idea in the first place; he should just let it be. Embarrassing, really, that he can't, though likely no more embarrassing than what he might grow to do if he *doesn't* expire within the next few months—they're both dodging a bullet right there.

Winston barks. Will realizes he's dropped the photo. The skies have gone dark. It might be evening soon or it might be night already. It might be tomorrow. He can't tell these things anymore.

Outside, tires crackle on the frozen earth. Will cycles through his options: Jack with another case, his neighbour Parr returning the icebox Will lent him, maybe Doctor Lecter. He wants it to be Doctor Lecter, despite not two weeks ago telling him otherwise, despite the knot in his stomach, despite everything. It's probably Jack. At least let it be a Ripper case, he thinks when he pulls himself upright. He sways as he makes his way to the door, blinking away disassociation. At least let it be the Ripper.

He opens the door on a stranger.

He's a slight, skinny man with an unassuming presence, hands shoved into pockets and eyes turned to the floor. When Will opens the door fully, he pulls the hands free and straightens the tension out of his fingers. He has good features and good hands, but he takes advantage of neither.

'Hello,' he says timidly. There's something in that voice that makes Will think of the rifle hanging over the fireplace—not the gun in its holster, no, the *rifle.* 'You're Will Graham.'

'Yeah. Who are you?'

'I didn't come here to—to hurt you,' the man rushes to reassure: Will's not been subtle. 'I saw you at the museum—the Smithsonian, about two weeks ago. It took me a while to track you down.'

‘What, did I forget an umbrella? Keep it.’

‘No—’ The man realizes too late Will wasn’t being serious, then laughs oddly. ‘Sorry. My name is Randall Tier. I need to talk to you about Hannibal Lecter.’

Will did say he only needed one more.

Well, here it is.

He lets Randall in. He bolts the door behind him. He gets the gun, just in case. He gets them each a glass of water. The glasses are clean, he thinks. They could be cleaner, but they’ll do.

In the front of his mind, he’s thinking idle thoughts that he knows are distractions. He wonders, how does Randall know Doctor Lecter? He is significantly younger, so it’s unlikely he’s a professional acquaintance. Maybe a dissatisfied patient who wants to compare notes. Maybe an ex-lover come to scare Will away. That would be fun. That would be something Will would enjoy.

He knows that’s not it.

‘How do you know Doctor Lecter?’

Randall hesitates at the gruff of Will’s voice. He braces himself.

‘I was his patient,’ he says. ‘Like you. I was like you. I was a favourite. I thought we were—I was very young, and—and it doesn’t matter what I thought. I got out. More like got kicked out. Anyway, but then I saw you at the museum, and I saw him with you, and—and you’re not well, are you?’

Will swallows down the anger that rises at that image: this man skulking from behind a corner, gaping.

‘I’m sick.’

‘What are you sick with?’

Will looks away. ‘I don’t know. They’ve not found anything wrong. I might just be going crazy. Does that satisfy your curiosity?’

Randall takes a step closer. ‘You work for the FBI,’ he whispers, all urgency, ‘I read about you online. You’re dangerous—’

‘Thanks,’ Will bites.

‘No, no, I don’t mind.’ Randall smiles. ‘That’s good. Maybe that means you can do something to save yourself, you know? Because what I meant is, I mean, you’re dangerous to *him.* You see? And I bet—I bet you’re not even sick. I bet he wants you sick. He made me think I was sick, too—when all I did was do as he asked me—’

Will can tell a confession when he hears one. ‘What did you do, Randall?’

Randall's lower lip is trembling. He bites down on it. 'I killed her,' he whispers. 'His patient.'

The buzz in Will's ears intensifies. He can barely hear Randall through it. 'You killed Doctor Lecter's patient?'

'All of a sudden, he didn't want to know me. He said he couldn't help me, he said I'd gone too far and that he had all these records, and that he was going to get me committed if—but he was the one to tell me to stand up for myself—'

'Probably didn't mean murder, Randall.'

'No, no,' Randall shakes his head. 'He didn't mind *that*. It's just that she was his patient, you know? And it could be traced back to him. That was a rule. You can't go after his patients.'

In the back of his mind, Doctor Lecter's smiles and frowns click into the gaps in the Ripper's profile. He'd been looking at two halves of a person all along: the surgical background and the surgeries. The need for control over the mind in life and over the body in death. The missing organs and the ostentatious dinners, oh God—the two halves become one—how is Will standing still? Why is he not sick, why does his heart still beat and his eyes still see?

'No,' he hears himself saying, 'no, there's no rule. He doesn't have a code. He was just bored with you.'

He's not sure what happens next, only that he is now sitting in an armchair, and that his head is thrumming agony. His eyes cut to Randall, but he doesn't bear the expression of a man who'd just struck someone unconscious. Just Will's own body then, perfectly weaponized against him.

'Are you okay?'

'Are *you* okay?' Will echoes, hoping that if he keeps on talking he'll forget that he can't breathe. 'You come in here telling all of this to an FBI agent?'

'But I only killed them because he told me—'

'I don't think that's going to hold up in court, Randall. Fuck, I'm going to be sick.'

Somehow, he makes it upstairs. His vision is all black spots and flashes of red. He is sick down the toilet bowl, he thinks, though it's honestly hard to tell—he can't taste it anyway.

'Should I—are you in shock? Or should I call an ambulance?'

'No! No, I'd need to—I'd need to call this in, I'd need to let them take you, just—God.'

'I just didn't want you to be alone,' Randall is pleading with him now, apparently unaware it would be more appropriate to wait until Will is done puking his lungs out. 'I remember I felt so alone I could die. I thought you needed a friend, someone to warn you—'

Will squeezes his eyes shut. 'I know,' he manages. 'Thank you. But I need to be alone right now.'

‘Okay. I understand. Just—don’t tell Doctor Lecter I came to see you, right?’

It’s the genuine fear in his voice that does it. Will starts to cry.

‘Oh—are you—?’

‘I’m fine, I’m fine!’ Will smacks his hands away. ‘I won’t tell him. I wouldn’t do that, okay? I—I’ll figure it out. But you’re safe, yeah? I swear you’re safe.’

That’s stronger than the tears, this conviction. It burns him up until he’s dry, until he looks into Randall’s eyes and makes him believe it.

‘Leave me your number.’ Will wrenches his phone from the pocket. ‘No, not here. Downstairs on my bed, bunch of files and photos. Write your name and number on the back of one. My phone, here—can you write a message for me? To Doctor Lecter, yeah? Tell him —tell him I’m cancelling our session Tuesday.’

He can’t see him. He absolutely *cannot* see him—he doesn’t think he can ever look him in the face again.

‘Got that?’

‘Yeah, yes—okay. Sent. Here.’ Randall fumbles for something in his pocket. It’s a leather string with something yellowish and organic hanging off the end. ‘It’s a bear tusk. Real one. It’s like a talisman, it’ll keep you safe. I made it but you’re my friend now, so it will work for you too.’

When Will accepts it, Randall grins like a child praised. He’s so eager for direction, for someone to show him the tiniest amount of appreciation, Doctor Lecter would have had no trouble collaring him at all.

Was Will this easy for him, too?

It’s all slotting into place: Doctor Lecter’s interest in every case, every step, every lead. His delight whenever Will thought aloud about the Ripper and his caginess when he was getting uncomfortably close. His easy composure even when his hands were stained in blood and gut all the way up to the elbows. Cassie Boyle in the field—fuck, the way he got that immediately, the way he got it all before Will even stopped speaking—what does it say about Will that he’d see a monster like that and think, *this, yes, God—please.*

Will can’t trust his own mind to tell him what time of day it is, or whether or not he is dying. Maybe he shouldn’t trust his mind on this, either.

Only he sees now that the reason he can’t trust his mind is because the Ripper, naturally, doesn’t *want him to.*

Randall is gone. The bear talisman is still clutched in Will’s hand, leaving glaring red indents.

Will considers sicking up again, but he has nothing left to give.

Shaking, he makes it back down the stairs. He gathers up the Ripper files, Randall's number at the top of the stack. He grabs the marker and takes it all upstairs, to the cluttered master bedroom he'd once thought he'd clean up and move into—but it never made sense to go to all that trouble just for himself.

He has the keys to Will's house. Will's given him those. Hopefully he won't think to look among the mess of an unused room.

He flips over a photograph and on the back he starts writing it all down. Date, victim, location. Where was Doctor Lecter? He could have met this guy at the opera, or at one of his fancy wineries. This one here worked in insurance. This one worked in IT. This one Doctor Lecter would have met at Hopkins. Through a common friend. No link that Will can establish for this one. None here. Dammit, this is all circumstantial—

There's a pressure in Will's chest. He feels like he's having a heart attack.

He yanks another file from the mound and scribbles, pressing down hard, ripping at the page, he writes the one thing he's wanted to write all along—the name of the Ripper's latest victim.

Will Graham, he writes. *Professional recommendation.*

Why is Will Graham alive?

The man missing his tongue in a church pew had only to say something. Will must have said a number of somethings to Doctor Lecter by now. His tongue remains resolutely in his mouth, so he couldn't have done enough flapping to warrant punishment. But if the Ripper has no code, then he at least has *reason*: if not for that, if not for this drive toward self-preservation that blinks at Will from half of these goddamn photographs, the same one that broke Randall in half years ago—if not for it, Will would have caught the Ripper already.

And then he realizes.

The Ripper *is* killing him. He's just taking his sweet time doing it.

Frantic, Will searches his memory, then puts down in all caps, *DONALD SUTCLIFFE. FRIEND FROM HOPKINS. NOBLE HILLS—BRAIN SCAN CLEAN.*

Is he poisoning him? Is he, what, inducing seizures? Or is there something genuinely wrong with Will that he's intentionally making worse? Or—

'What did you do?' he whispers. 'What did you do to me?'

He remembers suddenly the text he had Randall send. Oh God. The Chesapeake Ripper is killing him, and Will's just given him advance notice on a cancelled session to be fucking considerate.

He shoves the files into the nearest cardboard box and he trips down the stairs, the phone, where is it, here—Winston barks and huffs and whines—fuck, yeah, he sent it alright, what the hell is he supposed to do now? Can you delete a text you've sent? You can't, can you?

What if he calls? Well, if he calls, Will's not picking up. There is no way he can act like his heart isn't rending.

And if Will doesn't pick up, what if he comes over?

A thought, then—a flash, a chill, a clarity, what's it called? Oh, yeah. Anagnorisis.

Maybe he wasn't trying to be considerate when he asked Randall to send the text. Maybe he asked him to do it because he *wants* Doctor Lecter to come over. Because he wants, too, whatever it is he'd do to him then.

He's going to be sick again. Or suffocate—air, he needs that.

He bursts through the door onto the porch, and bends over himself, and gasps in the cold air until he feels light-headed.

Randall told him he'd killed a woman because the good doctor had moulded him into exactly the sort of monster who'd go for the throat. It's easy enough to imagine: another young patient, eager and pretty, a competitor threatening to steal away Randall's spotlight. He'd taken a life before then, Will is sure of it, and he'd received praise, and now she was the one getting the praise. Who wouldn't kill her?

Is that who Randall thinks Will is? After all, Will has taken a life, too. He tries to convince himself that was different, but then it's all different—and he didn't have to feel the way he—

Is that who the Ripper thinks Will is? This shadow, this monster in the woods, this thing stalking his dreams—is that the man Will has been all along? Why did he want Doctor Lecter to come: was it to pretend none of this happened, to be placated and convinced and murmured into peace, or was it to tear out his throat with his teeth?

He can taste it now. He couldn't taste the vomit and he couldn't taste anything he's eaten lately, but he can taste the Ripper's flesh between his teeth.

He's still holding the pendant, he realizes. *I didn't want you to be alone,* Randall said, and he gave him this: a hunter's trophy, a beast's weapon. The mark of a killer.

He can't hold it a moment longer, but it feels wrong to drop it to the ground. He hangs it up on the fencing of the porch instead.

The world is losing thread again. Will can feel the drop approaching. The branches in the woods wave and whistle, calling him. He is all of a sudden convinced there is something remarkably important that the woods are jealously hiding from him; that he must walk between the trees as he stands, no shoes and no jacket, that he must walk deeper and further until he has found him.

Will walks, consciousness slipping off him like a too-loose coat. For a while, it trails behind him in the thin lining of snow, then drops off completely.

But clarity will return, be it hours or days from now. It always does. And then—then, Will is going to set some things right, and fuck what kind of man he is in the end.

Will is not going to die.

Not until Hannibal Lecter pays for what he’s done, and pays the good, old-fashioned way: with flesh and blood.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your lovely comments on the last chapters!

Next week, Will must decide what to do in the wake of the memory he's recovered. It's a longer chapter and a real fun one - I'm looking forward to sharing it with you!

The Beast

Chapter Summary

Will makes a phonecall. Then, he makes a plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Beast.

The Chesapeake—Chesapeake *guy*—files are spread before Will on the cold floor. It's freezing, the floor, especially upstairs, and Hannibal doesn't bother vacuuming the rooms they don't use, so it's dusty, too. Will sits back on his ass and attempts to pry the flecks of lint from his sweats.

Ripper. The Chesapeake Ripper. Will needs to get better with names.

The day after the Other Will had left the memory in Will's bedside drawer, Will searched through half the house while Hannibal was out getting groceries. The day after that, he searched again as Hannibal walked the dogs. And again. Will isn't very good at searching is the issue—he will occasionally find himself incapable of locating his toothbrush until Hannibal points out to him it is exactly where it was yesterday.

But he did find the Ripper files, and he did ultimately find his hospital release forms. They're on the floor, too, spread out fanning like a crown of Will's proof. Brain scan, lumbar puncture, several blood tests, all signed on by Dr Sutcliffe before they were sent over to Dr Haines. All fake. Will remembers, now, the brain scan, but he doesn't remember anything else; and, more importantly, neither did the Will who scrawled his accusation against Sutcliffe on the back of an old Ripper profile.

This isn't the Hannibal he knows. The anger Will supposedly felt in Hannibal's house in Baltimore has drained out, and even in the immediate aftermath of the destruction he does not remember it felt like an ill-fitting shoe: awkward and hobbling. He wants to be angry because maybe if he were angry he would better know what to do; but he feels only horrified and betrayed and helpless, and he knows only to curl himself as small as he can manage and pretend none of it is real.

Maybe anger was a part of his brain that the fever's burnt straight through. It's ridiculous to think Hannibal would have been able to direct the destruction, to indicate the places he wanted struck, to peel away every last defence Will Graham once had against him—but Will thinks it anyway.

Through the window, with its peeling caulk that lets in all the breezes it can catch, Will hears stirring and huffing and footsteps crunching on the frozen earth. It takes him three breaths to connect these to the expectation that Hannibal will be back from the walk soon.

He shoves the files, the photographs and the whole of the display back into the cardboard box, and he shoves that to the back of the stack of old drawers, and then he glares at his sweats, still covered in dust. Downstairs, the door is screeching open; there's no time but Will needs to find time, because there is absolutely no way Hannibal won't notice, or that he won't be curious about what Will might be up to, snooping around the abandoned caverns of the house.

He flings himself through the door onto the landing, then straight into the bathroom. He turns the tap on to full and lets the water run down his extended arms, then heaves them back, wincing as the cold hits his stomach and runs down his thighs. He stops only once the sweats are dark with water, the dirt barely visible.

He examines the picture he makes in the mirror. Splashes and spills in the bathroom are such an essential part of his daily experience that Hannibal rarely bothers to ask him what happened; but it's difficult to imagine how he could have soaked himself so thoroughly just trying to wash his hands.

Well, let Hannibal wonder. At least if he is curious, he'll be curious about the sorts of things Will gets up to in the bathroom, and he is free to search that all he likes.

Will doesn't eat lunch that day, or dinner. The cold slithers and settles in his flesh, snapping tense around every joint. He sees himself in the mirror sometimes and something in him rears its head to say, *eat,* but eating is such a chore. Unless he is hungry, he can't be bothered to go through with it, and he is never hungry.

In the evening, Hannibal makes him some sort of yoghurt drink when Will asks for water. As though Will is going to drink it, thick and cloying as it is. He can barely swallow water at night because his throat becomes tight and closed with fear, and no wonder: he gets his injections at night, he dreams his nightmares and his memories at night, and he shakes awake with a deafening fullness in his bladder and the shadow of Hannibal's hands on his back, curling around the most fragile of bones.

Fear settles into tonight, too, and after his bath Will gravitates to the study, where Hannibal sits tucked into his reading. Will slips into the armchair opposite, pulling the duvet all around him and drawing his feet in close. He is so tired and loose from the bath, his eyes are falling closed and he has to grimace to wrench them open, but he is too afraid to sleep. And so here he is instead: seeking comfort in the presence of the very thing he fears.

Hannibal's eyes are lined purple. His knees sit relaxed, feet sliding their exhaustion against the floor. He's reading something on his tablet, though why on Earth he can't simply go to bed if he's so tired, Will cannot guess. They could both sleep then.

'What's that?'

‘A paper in a medical journal,’ Hannibal explains without looking up. ‘*Autoimmune encephalitis: proposed recommendations for symptomatic and long-term management.*’

This here, this is when Will should get angry. He’s sitting in Will’s armchair in Will’s house wearing Will’s winter socks, and he has the temerity to educate himself on how one goes about building on the loose sands that used to be Will’s mind, and Will’s heart, and Will’s—Will. That used to be a Will who could get angry and who knew how to use a sink.

‘Read it out away.’

‘Out loud. Should I start at the beginning?’

They both know it won’t make much of a difference; Will isn’t going to understand in either case. He nods anyway. Hannibal scrolls back to the top of the article and clears his throat.

The sentences go and go and go, tumbling Will over words he remembers hearing and others he remembers knowing. The sentences never end; even when Hannibal breaks to breathe, they don’t end. Will gives up trying to follow them and listens to Hannibal’s voice instead, soft and dry with the night’s weariness and the text’s complexity. It’s different than when he tells Will stories, shallower now and less sure with not knowing what comes after each phrase it braves. Some of the longest, oddest words, he pronounces like he’s never heard them said out loud—the stress is off or a vowel goes wrong, and then on the medical terms derived from Latin his accent shifts into something that makes Will think of sun and olives. Italian, maybe. Has Hannibal ever lived in Italy? He lived in France as a child, Will knows that much. Maybe it is French and Will just can’t tell.

Will hooks his chin on top of the duvet to better hold it in place. This is the Hannibal he knows, damp hair falling loosely over his forehead, yawn perched in the corner of his lip. This is the Will he knows, too: he is, and he listens, and he looks. He does not rebel, retort, or remember. Anger is beyond this Will’s reach, and this Will is just so much easier to be—even if it is only because that’s what Hannibal wanted for him.

It is at times like these that he considers he may have been fooled. Why would he trust the Other Will over Hannibal? Why would he trust a hazy memory brought as a gift from this lingering echo of Will Graham, distorted and perverted by the curves of the reflective surfaces on which he appears, when it is Hannibal who feeds and shelters him? The revenant covets entry into their house, he covets the warmth and sustenance that lie within. He must be kept out at all costs. Every night, Will makes sure the windows are closed and that no food or drink is left on the porch, makes sure that not even a scrap of what is theirs is shared.

The Other Will would have shown Will any lies he thought of as long as he believed they would benefit him or stir chaos—are ghosts not beasts of chaos?

He might be able to fully convince himself to distrust the Other, he is sure, if only he weren’t forced every night to dream the Other’s dreams.

The Other’s dreams drip with blood. His nightmares peek from under the bed to catch the drops in their awing mouths. Tonight, he dreams of the woods and he dreams of chasing the creature, black and antlered and inhuman, the city lights blinking closer and closer—just like

he used to dream before he was this impotent, paralyzed Will, back when he hunted monsters in broad daylight.

This time, he leaps over a bush in tatters, he thuds on the fallen tree trunk that crosses the stream of cooled blood, he slips on the red iced over the wood and then he reaches—and his hand closes around live flesh.

But the very moment it does, the moment he feels the softness of it and the give, he knows he's not *chasing* the creature at all: he is following. And when he pulls the little boy toward himself and around, he isn't apprehending the beast, he is helping him get back up on his feet, his small hands dark with the dirt from when he caught himself mid-fall.

Once the boy has his balance again, Will lets go. 'Slow down,' he tells him. 'Save your strength.'

Winter buffets them from all directions, tightening skin. The boy's sandy hair is covered with a sheen of frost, and his nose is fast going from red to blue. It's a good thing he has a belly full of man—he would never have made it so far otherwise.

The boy sways suddenly, hands coming up to claw at his throat.

'Don't you dare sick up,' Will hisses. 'You need her to last you until we get to town.'

Hannibal nods. His eyes cut to the bearskin that rests heavy over Will's shoulders. He doesn't ask.

With a sigh, Will slips the fur from his back and wraps it around him. It's large enough that it trails after Hannibal in the snow. He has to grip it tight to stop it sliding off.

Will takes his hand, small and cold and veiny, in case he stumbles again. As they walk, he wonders who it is that's leading who, and why he can't seem to remember anymore.

The world is bright when Will wakes. His legs ache as though his run through the woods had been more real than his bed and his stillness.

After breakfast, Hannibal comments on the clear skies and proposes a longer walk. Will hums something insubstantial, which drives Hannibal into a frenzy of packing lunch and setting out the heavy boots until he's all ready to go, which is when Will turns around to go back to bed. Hannibal spends a while trying to coax him out again, but eventually gives up and goes alone.

Will waits until the last of the dogs disappear behind the tree line, then goes upstairs to find Randall's number.

It takes him three attempts to type it in right. By the time he does, his hands are shaking so badly he fears dropping the phone, so he puts it on speaker the way Hannibal showed him and sets it on the floor, hunching over it on the balls of his feet. It's a good balancing exercise, the kind he should probably do more of.

As he waits through the beeps of the connection, Will reviews his thinking.

First, he can't trust the Other Will and he can't distrust him either. Second, he doesn't know who Hannibal is but he does know he is a liar. Third, he can't very well trust his own judgement when he barely knows left from right.

Fourth.

'Hello?'

Will falls back to his heels. He *remembers* the voice. All real.

'Randall?'

'Yes, this is Randall Tier. Is it—is it Will?'

He sounds painful. He sounds like he's been waiting for this call but never thought it would come.

'Yeah,' Will says, weak with relief. 'Yeah, it's me. Could you—could you come see me? In Wolf Trap?'

A shuffle on the other end of the line. 'I—now?'

'How fast can you get here?'

'Uh, probably—probably twenty minutes.'

'Then yeah, now. Hurry.'

'Okay. Yes. I'm on my way.'

Will might have pitied him this eagerness, once. But that was before he knew what it was to be both powerless and lonely at the same time. He'd only ever been one or the other before.

He knows reaching out to Randall is foolish. But if not Randall, then who else? Jack Crawford would try to help Will if he came to him, but he would follow procedure, and where in procedure does it say a thing about beasts of chaos and the bloodlines of houses? Alana would pretend to believe him, but she wouldn't seriously consider the risks and might well find herself crossing either Hannibal or the Other by accident—Will can't put her in danger when he isn't sure himself what the danger is.

Randall is at the door fifteen minutes later. Or so he tells him: it's not like Will knows how to tell the goddamn time.

'I made it in fifteen,' he says, breathless. His words leave white clouds of perspiration in the air. 'I was speeding.'

Will isn't so stupid as to let him inside: Hannibal might smell him. He shuts the door behind them and directs Randall to sit on the porch. Then, he tells him everything: he tells him about Hannibal and the files, about the Other Will and the basement and the pendant.

Randall's head bobs up and down like he's one of those Betty Boop toys, eyes wide and fixed on Will in something just short of awe. Will could tell him anything and he'd believe it, which he supposes doesn't much matter since he's telling the truth.

'He came to see me,' Randall reveals once Will is done. 'He came to see me and ask me about the tooth—I thought you were dead. I thought—Will, why did you give him the talisman?'

'I didn't,' Will says quickly, more worried about something else. 'He came to—to see you, so what? Do you think he knows you go—came to talk to me?'

'He stole it,' Randall decides, sounding vicious. 'He stole the talisman and then you ended up in the hospital—of course.'

'Randall. Did he know?'

He meets his eye. 'No,' he seems sure, though Will doesn't know whether to trust that. 'He didn't know I gave you the talisman or anything, and I didn't tell him. He had no idea.'

Will probably *shouldn't* trust it. But it is not as though he has a dozen other allies lined up to be interviewed.

Before he can lie and say he believes him, Randall leans forward and whispers, all readiness and all muscle—he is skinny but it's deceptive, there's a wiry strength in there that could crush Will's throat—

'What are we going to do?'

It gets Will by surprise. He can't plan ahead enough to bring his empty glass with him when he goes to the kitchen for water—but then of course Randall doesn't know that.

'Are you going to go to the FBI?'

'No.' That is perhaps what Will Graham would have done, but Will Graham could speak in full sentences. Will Graham could write a full-page profile on the Chesapeake Ripper, in that funny typewriter font with words that Will knows but struggles to read. What evidence would he have to show now, even if he did manage to get anyone to take him seriously? Four round bruises on his shoulder, the shape of fingers? The testimony of a ghost? A quote taken from a dream?

'They won't believe me.' He'd rather not explain, but then he'd rather Randall not become upset with him. He forces himself to go soft, open, just like Hannibal likes him. 'I'm not great with planning. Or else—more—*much* else, really.'

Randall looks like he might want to touch him but he's too shy to go through with it. Thank God.

He bites his lip instead, and then he says quietly,

'I could kill him.'

Will looks at him sharply.

‘I mean, I couldn’t then because—’ he draws in a breath, searching for an excuse that isn’t going to make him sound inadequate ‘—because I was all alone and I was young and I didn’t want to risk it, you know. But now there’s you, too. And he’s trapped you here and he’s not going to let you leave, right? But you can help me catch him out, and for you, I will—’

It is only now that Will remembers, properly, that Randall is a killer.

He knew this, of course, from the memory the Other Will left for him in the bedside drawer and from the papers spreading out in front of him like wings, but he didn’t *realize* it. Much the same way, he imagines, that Will Graham could walk around for months mooning over a shark-toothed thing that followed him into each nightmare, forgetting to know.

It occurs to Will that he isn’t saving himself—merely exchanging one noose for another.

‘You told me you killed his patient,’ he says, surprised at how even he can keep his voice. ‘Why?’

Randall swallows, gathers himself. ‘It was stupid.’

‘Why?’

He laughs, self-conscious. ‘I saw them together, after a session. It was his last of the day. He was walking her to her car. It wasn’t—nothing happened. He didn’t do anything, she didn’t do anything, they just said their goodbyes, but I—I could tell. And then I waited the week after and he did it again. You can tell these things, you know? There’s a, a thing. An energy or something, right, between people? Like a spark or a breath or this time that grows from short to forever. I mean, you know what I’m talking about. You get people.’

Will nods distractedly. Randall’s hands are wringing his coat, over and again, like he’s trying to squeeze the soul out of it.

‘So, I killed her,’ Randall concludes matter-of-factly. ‘I bashed her head in on a rock and then I ate her face.’

Charming.

‘Doctor Lecter told me to embrace my nature.’ Randall’s voice goes a little haughty, a little breathless. ‘Well, that’s it. It’s not my fault he didn’t like it.’

Randall is damn lucky he’s alive, Will thinks next. Why would Hannibal leave him alive? It’s the stupidest thing to have done.

‘I don’t mind killing him,’ says Randall. ‘I swear.’

Will believes that much. Only—

‘No,’ he says, throat dry.

‘You don’t have to do it,’ Randall promises. ‘You don’t even have to look if—’

‘I said no, Randall. It’s too dangerous.’

The bench screams its screech as it’s pushed back against the wall. Randall rises; he squares his shoulders. He is no taller than Will. Even so, Will feels punishingly small. He thinks about the rifle, tucked inside the house. He thinks about the dogs feasting on the face of a dead man, but when he tries to imagine Randall there, he can’t: he can see only himself.

Even if he could grab the gun, even if he knew how to use it, he’s not that, he’s not whatever Randall is. It takes a predator’s single-mindedness to kill another predator. Randall might have believed that was Will once, but it would take a measure more insanity than he possesses to believe so of Will now. Even Will, with all his imagination, can’t do it.

‘It’s not too dangerous,’ Randall is talking. ‘Not for me.’

‘Randall—please—’

‘I won’t leave you here with him. He deserves to die for what he’s done to you—to *us.*’

With a flash of terror, Will recognizes in his expression what he has seen before only in the Other Will’s face: the unassailable, inarguable, inevitable call of bloodlust.

He will not convince him. It is a waste of air, even, to try.

So, Will does something else: the only other thing he can think to do.

‘You could kill someone else.’

Randall’s eyes go wide.

The thing is, Will has few weapons in his arsenal, and it would not take much for this particular weapon to turn its blade on him. Suppose it occurs to Randall he should be less protective and more jealous? Hannibal’s done far worse than walk Will to his car at the end of the day.

No, better roll over and offer Randall the thing he wants before he stops wanting it. He wants to save Will? Let him save Will. He wants blood? Let him have blood.

Randall won’t bite the hand that feeds him, so Will shall feed.

‘His name is—’ fuck, what is his name? ‘—wait here.’

Will goes up the stairs and finds the cardboard box. Sutcliffe. Donald Sutcliffe.

He wonders if Donald Sutcliffe deserves to die. How can you tell?

He brings the file down to Randall, who reads the name out loud.

‘Hannibal has motive,’ Will explains. ‘Sutcliffe’s a lost—loose end. I’ll get you his hair to—uh—flower—plant on the scene. I can’t send Hannibal to—to—prison, to prison when—after—for what he did, but I can get him there on something he didn’t do.’

He tries to read in Randall’s face whether this makes any sense at all. The reverence there is hard to see past.

‘Well?’ Will feels himself growing impatient. He’d rather not be alone with Randall any more. ‘You’ll do it?’

Randall’s betty-booping again. ‘Yes, I’ll do it—Will, I’ll need to get you a different phone. We’ll have to delete my number from this one, and then I’ll get you a burner, just to talk to me—’

He’s right, of course. Will pushes his phone into Randall’s hand like a hot piece of coal. God, what is he playing at? How is he going to keep any of this together in his head without it tangling into knots?

After Randall’s visit, the world speeds up. Will is running again in his dreams, though whether he is following or leading, he can’t ever tell. He repeats these facts to himself, over and over until they mean very little: he must allow Randall to kill Sutcliffe lest Randall decides to kill either Will or Hannibal instead. He must not allow Randall to kill Sutcliffe; it is too big and too horrid a thought to consider that he might. He must do something to stop or to aid, and he must do it before he forgets what he is doing. He must make sure no food is left out on the porch lest the Other Will smells it.

He tries to plan ahead, but by the time he arranges the facts again in his head in the right order it is time to sleep or eat or wash, and then he forgets again. Once, Hannibal interrupts him just as he’s getting to the first *what if,* and he can sense a contingency warping and setting into shape, and then Hannibal gives him his tea—Will pushes him away, his skin scorching, a dog barks and whines and Hannibal jumps back to avoid the stream of hot water—and then Will doesn’t remember anything anymore except that.

At least he has Randall now. Randall will do most of the planning. Randall will find out where Sutcliffe lives and Randall will tell Will what to do and when. All Will needs to remember, really, is to check the men’s restroom at his speech therapist’s office, and hope Randall’s found the right one even though Will couldn’t tell him the name or the address.

All Will has to remember is that he always has Hannibal. If he tells Hannibal, he might be drowned or he might be thrown out into the snow, but perhaps neither Hannibal nor Sutcliffe will have to die—just Randall, Will supposes, and that makes him sick to the stomach, too.

When he is next in D.C., he tells his therapist that he needs the restroom. He forgets, first, the word *restroom,* and has to wade through the awkwardness for a solid twenty seconds before the woman finally takes mercy on him. Once he has made his way to the restroom, he forgets why he is there and actually does take the piss he doesn’t need. Then, he remembers and realizes he is an idiot.

He double-checks that all the stalls are empty. Something moves, twice, in the corner of his vision, but every time Will spins around to catch it, he sees only his own reflection, blinking confusedly from the gleam of the mirror. The burner phone is tucked into the air-vent like Randall said it would be. It has a keyboard that clicks under Will's fingers. You have to press each key a few times to get to the letter you want. It takes Will a while to understand that, but once he does, a memory floats up, vivid as day: the sound and feel of the keys, the numbers on them Will had long rubbed off, the chime of an incoming text, the glare of the librarian. He was good at this once, hunched over his notes. He doesn't remember who it was he was texting.

He keeps the burner in the inner pocket of his jacket throughout the session. It's distracting. He can tell the therapist is annoyed with him, though she hides it well. Will could not care less.

She walks him back to reception. Will looks around, but he doesn't recognize any of the people waiting. It makes his stomach seize up.

'Mr Graham?' The receptionist leans over the counter to catch his eye. 'Your friend Alana told me when she left that you've got someone picking you up. A—' she looks down at a post-it affixed to the computer screen '—Hannibal Lecter.'

Right, yes. Alana was dropping him off, Hannibal is picking him up. Will really wishes they'd make up their minds.

'He's not here,' Will tells her.

'He's probably running a little late. Why don't you sit over here to wait?'

She gives him a hard candy from the bowl set out before her, then indicates a chair near the reception desk, like Will is a problem child.

Will sits. The burner shifts against his chest.

He takes it out and flips the screen a few times for something to do. There's only one number saved in the contacts: Randall's. Will sends him a text to say everything is fine.

He considers calling Hannibal. Why isn't he here yet? Will despises waiting, and he despises it more when he doesn't know how long he's supposed to be waiting for. Hannibal knows that.

Deep in him, something stirs and warms. His hands tighten into fists.

He is suddenly so angry he can't *breathe.*

And that's when, without thinking, without considering it for a single fucking moment, that's when he grabs the burner and he types in Hannibal's number from memory—Hannibal had him memorize it in case he got lost, when he should have just given Will a collar and tag, *deliver back to,* gold-studded and so heavy he can't swallow—and then he writes, he tells him, he is shouting it—

I know

Will's head is stuffed full of cotton. It would take entirely too long to put everything in order: the past, the present, the threat of an elusive future, his feelings about Hannibal and about Randall and about himself, it would take too long before he reached eventually the place his intentions crystalized. He doesn't put anything in order. He doesn't need to. He feels a growth in him, reaching, dropping, empty as the emptiest void, and he peers down, and once he has peered down he can feel himself tipping forward—

He pushes a hand into the pocket of his jacket to hide its tremble and the place where his nails, without needing any signal from his brain at all, are driving deep into skin.

His knuckle brushes against something sharp and crinkly.

It's the hard candy he's been given.

—*fuck,* why would he not eat it *right away,* you need to keep the food away from—

There is nothing then. There is no phone. There are no keys. Will's fingers move, but they are not Will's fingers anymore. There is only this feeling, empty and growing emptier. Will can't tell what it is. He can't name it. He knows only that it isn't fear, or despair, or helplessness or betrayal.

Maybe it's nothing as complex as that.

Maybe it's just hunger.

'Will.'

Will startles.

Hannibal stands over him, gloves clasped in one hand and Will's coat held out in the other. Where'd he get that—oh, the hangers in the corner there.

'Time?' Will asks, rubbing at his face to expel from it sleep. He couldn't have dozed off for long or else surely he would be getting more odd looks from the receptionist and the other patients. It only feels as though he'd slept through an age.

'Quarter to two,' says Hannibal.

'What time were you supposed to be here?'

'Half past one.'

'They're learning how to read the time in group next week,' Will grouses at him. 'Something about big hand, little hand. I should bring you along.'

He isn't upset anymore, though, not really. For the first time in a while, he has a more pressing need than the mundane frustrations of time and uncertainty—he is sure he will *die* if he doesn't eat soon.

Hannibal is all too happy to comply. When they get home, he serves Will a spinach and goat-cheese tarte and roasted walnuts and marinated chestnuts, and makes Will honey-glazed pears, and fries his eggs just right. Once Will is done with that, Hannibal no longer feels the need to send him his favourite side-eye glance of displeasure when Will exiles himself from his company to hide away upstairs; apparently Will is allowed solitude as long as he has eaten Hannibal's food first, and so carries the fruits of his labour with him wherever he goes.

Upstairs, Will fishes out the burner and reads the messages he has written.

I know most of it

Thought it was your pet braincase that had the amnesia

Why haven't you killed Dr Sutcliffe yet? Big wide track left uncovered there

The warmth from the meal drains out of him all in one.

He returns to the main messaging screen and selects the other thread.

We have to do it tonight, he types in. He hesitates before hitting *send*: he hardly wishes to do it at all, but after the outrageous taunts he has sent Hannibal's way, Sutcliffe is unlikely to live much longer in either case. At least this way, they can execute the plan Will dislikes rather than not executing a plan at all; at least this way, Will has some control.

He hits the button.

Not a full second has gone by when the phone starts shaking wildly. It's set to silent, but the sudden bright glare of the screen still makes Will jump.

He hits several keys at random until he finds the one to reject the call.

Don't call me, he types up furiously.

But tonight, Will? We don't have a plan yet.

Don't they? The plan is kill Sutcliffe, frame Hannibal—at least as far as Will himself recalls it.

Told you I'm no good with plans. Pick me up late

What time?

How is Will supposed to know? What time do they go to bed normally?

He pushes the phone into the pocket of his slacks, leans over the stairway and calls out,

'Hannibal! What time is late?'

Dishes clink and water dribbles in the kitchen. Hannibal emerges, looking very pleased with himself. He's been like that since Will asked for seconds over lunch.

‘That would depend on the context, I suppose,’ he muses.

Will doesn’t have time for him to have his fun. ‘What time do we sleep?’

‘Around ten, Will.’

‘What’s later than that?’

‘Eleven. Midnight. One in the morning.’

‘That one.’

Will bounds to the bathroom—better if Hannibal sees him disappear in there than the empty bedroom—

‘Goodbye, Will!’

He slams the door shut and turns the lock. Hannibal always tells him not to. He hopes he can hear the click of it from downstairs.

One in the morning, he tells Randall. *Don’t be late*

Whatever the plan is, Will understands that step one must inevitably be putting up a good act. That in itself is not an issue: he must only allow himself to forget what the night has in store and he is safe from scrutiny. The difficulty is remembering again in time.

It takes the blazing heat of the shower—he’s been trying his hand at washing himself lately, and it’s been a mixed bag altogether but has come with the benefit of setting the water as hot as he bloody likes—and that is when he gasps with the urgency of it, fuck, what time is it now?

In his pyjamas and sweater and robe because the house is tonight much like the North Pole, he comes down into the kitchen. He checks that there are no sweets or dog treats secreted in any of the pockets, and that no food is left lying around on counters—but the clothes are fresh from the wash and the leftovers from dinner have been put away.

Hannibal’s back is to him. He’s doing the dishes again. There’s something meditative to it: the repetitiveness of each action, the soft splash of the water, the mastery of the process that allows his mind to wander. Where is it now?

‘We should get drunk,’ Will says.

They do.

Will doesn’t have all that much, but the alcohol does something strange to his perception: it scatters the puzzles around in a fresh way, a different way. He’s scrambling and he doesn’t mind that he’s scrambling. Hannibal is planted on Will’s bed looking entirely incapable of anything, except perhaps drinking and smiling and leaning. He’s reclining on his shoulder now, the ball of it buried into the mattress. It can’t be comfortable, but he makes it look graceful.

It sounds as though the world outside is caving in on itself. The lizard part of Will's brain, which the illness has preserved in its entirety, cowers, but the cower stays where it begins, near the top of Will's spine.

Will nudges Hannibal with a foot. Hannibal forces himself alert, as though to reassure Will he is still alive. He looks plenty drunk, but Will decides in this moment it is not enough.

'You need more.'

Hannibal frowns as though he disagrees, then says, 'I think I saw a red wine at the bottom of the cabinet by the fridge. I'd prefer that to the whiskey if I must.'

On his way there, Will sways, though not because he is drunk, but because he's been immobile for a while and his legs are all ants and needles. The kitchen smells like the white chocolate Hannibal made, like the night and the dying lightbulb. Fizzling. Is that a word? Can you smell a light bulb? Will can. It occurs to him that this is the first time in a while when he hasn't been afraid.

The wine is there, in the bottom cabinet by the fridge like Hannibal said. Will has a go at it, but it's not a screw-on, it's got a cork in it and that needs an implement, Will knows. He is halfway to opening his mouth and calling for Hannibal so he can figure it out for him, but then clasps his jaws tight. His teeth knock against one another, the sound of it so painful Will has to close his eyes and just breathe for a moment. He can do it. He needs an implement with a name that escapes him. He thinks he knows what it looks like.

It takes a while for him to find it but he does, in the larger of the cutlery drawers. Hannibal still hasn't checked on him. Is he asleep?

The curl of metal sinks into the cork as though into moss. Will turns it and pushes and tugs, and then he clutches at the sides to pull it free, and then something happens, he's not sure, something slips and a hold loosens and his eyes see static, his ears are ringing with the absolute racket of it, like a gun shot—like his rifle—

There's less glass than you'd expect but it is there, at Will's feet, and then there's the deep burgundy: spreading. A puddle of red. It's soaking into Will's socks. Like Hannibal's kitchen. Like tonight, like what Randall's going to do if Will doesn't stop him, like Hannibal—like the things Will can't stop.

Hannibal appears, disappears. He's gone back for his slippers, Will thinks distantly. He can hear him shushing the dogs, ordering them to stay put. If one of them gets their paw cut, that's going to be on Will, too. His breaths are coming in fast and awful, smelling like the burn of the kitchen light bulb.

'Will,' Hannibal says right in his ear, smooth and throaty with the drunkenness Will's heaved onto him. 'Breathe.'

'I—I can't.' Will's grasping at him, shaking. At least he knows he's being pathetic. At least he knows there's no point getting so upset over a broken wine bottle. Only the fear—the fear is back, his respite is over, it's here again and it's here to stay.

‘You can. I can hear you breathing right now.’

‘N—no,’ Will presses his forehead into Hannibal’s shoulder. Tell him, he thinks. If you tell him now, Hannibal will take care of Randall. He will fix it. ‘You’re j—just—hearing things —you’re drunk.’

‘I need to pick up the glass. Stand here?’

‘Yeah.’

Will stands and watches him get the shuffle and go down to his hunches, hiding his unsteadiness in the tightening of muscle. Only the sheen of sweat on his neck and the pink of his cheeks betray him now.

‘How is breathing going, Will?’

‘Shit.’

He’s in front of him again, blacking out Will’s vision. Hot tears run down Will’s cheeks, fat and itchy. He feels like he’s standing beside himself: like how to be Will or who Will is are both things he has forgotten.

‘I don’t—’ he claws at his throat; Hannibal grips his hands tight and lays them trapped against his chest ‘—oh God, loud, it was loud—’

‘Yes. Breathe. I’m afraid this is what happens when we mix alcohol with medication, Will.’

‘No, I just can’t hold a fucking bottle—’

‘I meant panic attacks.’

‘Oh. Yeah.’

Will draws in a new breath, shakier even than he feels. Hannibal squeezes his hands as he does and releases on the exhale, then again. After a while, Will isn’t sure anymore whether Hannibal’s copying his breathing or if Will’s copying Hannibal’s hands. His face is tingling with too much oxygen.

‘What are you going to drink now?’ Will complains nasally. The tears have stopped but his throat, his nose and his lungs all feel soaked with them.

Hannibal smiles, wider than he does usually. Another tell that Will commits to memory, for no reason whatsoever other than that he wants to remember: sheen of sweat, pink cheeks, smiles that show teeth. ‘We still have plenty of whisky left,’ he says. ‘I promise to drink the equivalent to the wine’s alcohol content.’

‘You said it’s horrible,’ Will reminds him.

‘It is horrible. Don’t walk around here until I’ve vacuumed in case there are any shards left— stand on my feet.’

Will wants to point out that Hannibal could just as easily bring him slippers, but then he's more interested in the alcohol content issue. He puts his right foot on Hannibal's right, precarious until Hannibal catches him around the back. 'How much is that?'

'The whiskey is forty percent and the wine would have been just over ten. A quarter bottle then—a tall glass.'

Will's other foot finds its seat. He's only an inch or so taller as he is now, but it's uncanny enough. He's been hefted closer to Hannibal's eye level but closer to Hannibal, too, in a way that makes meeting his gaze impossible. What he gets instead is Hannibal's cheek, every pore and every hair, the lobe of his ear, the scent of sweat and blankets.

'Can't even tell if you're lying,' Will complains, too loud for how close he is; the skin around Hannibal's mouth tenses in a wince. 'I don't do numbers.'

'I'm not lying, Will.'

'Fine. Walk.'

'Alright. Right foot.'

'Your right or my right?'

It's Will's right. As Hannibal steps backward, half of Will's body falls forward on him. Another step—it feels like tripping again and again. Hannibal's doing a fair enough job holding him upright, but he does seem to show issues holding *himself* upright, so really they would be risking less bodily injury if Will just walked normally and tried not to step on the glass. But he is laughing now instead of breathing and instead of crying, which he supposes was the whole point.

It's easier, really, to be this, what Hannibal wants. Why is he trying to make himself into what Randall wants instead? Bait and victim and a fledgeling psychopath's cheerleader?

It would be too easy, he thinks bitterly as he watches Hannibal drift off to sleep, if he could for once just stick with easy.

He allows himself to fade into sleep briefly, then wakes Hannibal to help him up the stairs. It's meant to be clever, but it's also really because Will needs to piss. Then, he lies in bed with his eyes wide open, waiting for Hannibal's breathing to go up in volume again. It takes little enough time with the alcohol. Good: Will is fairly sure it will be one a.m. soon.

Carefully, he slips out of bed. He's taught himself all the places where the boards creak. A dance in the dark; the thrum of blood, deafening in his ears, keeping time.

He manages the stairs in half an eternity. They're always harder at night, though Will doesn't understand why. He's afraid he'll wake Hannibal if he turns a light on, so he scours the master bedroom blind, fingers trailing over shelves and boxes and motes of dust. He sneezes twice, into the crook of his elbow, the muffled eruption like a stroke of thunder in the quiet.

The burner in the pocket of his robe, he makes his way back downstairs, then through the door out to the porch, where his boots are drying the day's wet. His feet fit inside snugly even though he can't seem to remember the right way to tie the laces. He does *know* how to do it; it's only that he can see the lights of Randall's car through the naked trees and his brain is all given up to knowing other things, like what they're about to do.

It's a dry night, glutted on frost. Randall's parked behind the tree line so that the sound of the engine won't rouse the dogs. Will stumbles twice on his way there, the ground growing looser the further he goes, shifting unpredictably under his feet.

Once he has the first of the trees behind him, it's as though he has left the world altogether. The sounds of the wind, of the creaks and groans of the house, of breaths and footsteps and humming electricity, they are kept off by a cushion of silence. It is in that silence that Will realizes he is alone in every sense of it, perhaps for the first time since he woke up in the hospital.

Randall leans over to open the passenger door for him. His brows are knit with straining thread.

'Is that what you're going to wear?'

Will looks down at his pyjamas and his robe. Fuck.

'It's alright,' Randall placates quickly. 'I bought you some clothes just in case—we shouldn't be wearing our own. Fresh out the shop means you've got less of a risk of leaving evidence behind.'

Will nods weakly. He can feel the acid rising to his throat.

'You got his hair?'

Hannibal's hair. Of course. That is the whole point: a clean kill and then the planting of evidence. The FBI won't need Will's stumbling profile to connect the acquaintance and the motive and the hair.

'I forgot.' He wrenches the hem of his sleeve in his hand. It does little to relieve the shame.

'You forgot—but Will, we need—'

'It's fine.' Will imagines the sleeve is Hannibal's hand, tightening and releasing to guide his breath. 'I'll go back.'

Again, he trudges through the wood and the lawn, and again he steps around every creaky board, and hushes the dogs that yawn and blink blearily. He'd never get away with kneeling over Hannibal and plucking the hair directly from his head, so instead he slides open the top drawer in the armoire, holding it up at the sides so it doesn't sink and thud, and pulls out the sweater Hannibal was wearing tonight. He takes it to the study and in the orange light of the desk lamp—he's using his whole body to block it off from flooding the rest of the house—he

examines the stitching, he examines every standing thread, until he finds a golden line that cuts off at roughly the right length.

This time when he opens the front door, the mattress gives a whine. Will freezes, looks: Hannibal has rolled over in his sleep.

Breathless, he waits. A second, two, ten. Eventually, Hannibal's breathing returns to its normal rhythm, and Lana puts her head back down. Will can move again.

Randall plucks off the sweater the hairs that look most like Hannibal's and deposits each into a plastic zip-lock bag. Will tells him they might just as well be one of the dogs'. Randall says it doesn't matter because no one's going to suspect a dog and no one's going to suspect Will, and anyway Randall can tell the difference between a dog's hair and a man's.

Will clambers into the backseat to change while Randall drives and tells him the plan. Will would like to share this capacity for multitasking. He is himself struggling to both figure out which way the shirt goes and how to keep from hitting his head against the door whenever Randall takes a turn. The clothes slide to the floor when the car slows, and they spread all over the upholstery when Randall stomps down on gas. Most of what Will registers of the plan amounts to Randall grousing about the necessity for clean cuts and clean strikes to best imitate Hannibal's fastidiousness, and leave as little evidence behind as they can, save for, of course, what Will still privately thinks is Winston's hair.

'It's just not really my thing, you know?' explains Randall. Will is at this point fighting the tears of frustration that are making the dim of the world bleary and the pant legs impossible. 'But I'll do it for you, Will, this time.'

There's an overtly ominous note to the phrasing: *this time.* As though Randall is confident already he will have another opportunity to impress, and that when he does, he expects he'll have the strength to snap the leash Will is holding.

It's a long drive. Despite the circumstances, Will's eyes threaten revolt. He yawns into the back of his hand; every time he does he sees Randall smile with the corner of his mouth. It's the simple pleasure, Will guesses, of casual superiority: even though Will is older and even though Will presumably has an FBI badge on the bottom of a drawer somewhere, it's Randall who's driving the car and killing the man and staying alert through the night. There's no maliciousness to Randall's enjoyment of this fact, so Will doesn't begrudge it. He imagines instead what other things Randall could be compelled to do, just to prove he can take better care of Will than Will ever could of him.

'This is it,' Randall says at last, pulling over. 'Get off here, walk straight down the road and it'll be the fifth house along. Will you be okay with that?'

'I can count to fucking five,' Will snaps, then freezes.

Randall's curled in on himself. He makes Will think of a chastised dog that's run wild too long—it flinches and whines, and then it goes straight for your throat.

'Sorry,' he says quickly. 'Nervous.'

‘Yeah,’ Randall gives a chuckle, his shoulders dipping. ‘Me too.’

‘Fifth house along.’

‘Yeah. I can’t drive into the neighbourhood. They have cameras. Just drive him out this way and head for the woods. I’ll follow.’

Was that the plan? Fair enough. Will can do that, he thinks.

‘Pull up the hood—keep your head down in case, okay? But even if a camera catches you, you know, we can make it like he sent you out as bait.’

‘You *are* sending me out as bait.’

‘I mean—yeah, I guess. I only mean, make it seem like he made you, you know? You’re in his care and everything, so they’d buy that for sure. Like you had no choice.’

‘Right.’

‘Just keep your head down.’

‘Okay.’

The truck’s suspension sits high above the ground; Will’s feet make a soft sound when they meet the asphalt. He catches himself against the door, waits for the dizziness to pass, then throws on the hood and starts down the street.

The whole of the neighbourhood sleeps. The curtains on most houses are pulled. He hopes no insomniacs are peeking through the gaps tonight: he must seem plenty suspicious when he loses count of the houses and has to start over, twice. To hell with that anyway—he is bait, isn’t he? Bait’s erratic. That’s what’s so enticing about it.

The doorbell doesn’t ring but sings out a melody like a cheap birthday card. Will is suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion. He rests his forehead against the doorjamb as he pushes the button, and listens to the lull of it again, and once more.

Then, a shuffle comes from within. The door is wrenched open and Will scuttles back, the noise and air of it too close to his face for comfort.

Sutcliffe is staring at him, spooked but not surprised—he will have lived through the first shock when he peered through the peephole.

‘Mr Graham?’

He’s wearing casual clothes but not pyjamas. His eyes and lips are wet with sleep. He must have gone to bed late, maybe halfway into a TV movie or a particularly boring book, and dropped before he remembered to brush his teeth.

‘Will?’

‘Yeah.’ Will tries to focus his gaze on Sutcliffe’s face, but he’s always an inch or two short.

‘Will, what are you—’

‘I need your help.’ Will doesn’t have to work hard to sound plaintive. God knows he needs anyone’s help. Anyone at all would be better than what he has now. ‘Please.’

Sutcliffe hides his face in his hands as though he’s pretending to not be here, just for a little while. ‘I—how did you even get here? I suppose they must have discharged you by now, but—Jesus, did you take a bus? How did you know where I live?’

‘Please—’

Will is severely underdressed for the weather, which he imagines was part of Randall’s ploy. He is already shaking violently; he’ll have gone blue in the face, too. His shoes, he realizes when Sutcliffe gives him the once-over, are still untied.

‘I’d better call Doctor Lecter.’

‘No!’

He stares at Will’s hand on his shoulder. He doesn’t shrug it off and he doesn’t tell Will to remove it; but the repulsion in his expression can be one thing only, and as it dawns on Will that he suspected correctly, that he was right all along, acid rises to his throat and a cold knot tightens his stomach. Sutcliffe knows what he has done. He knows exactly what he has done and what he’s doing, and he can’t stand that he does, and Will being here is a worse reminder than any.

‘Please don’t—don’t cut—phone—call phone. Don’t.’

Sutcliffe takes Will by the wrist and tugs like he’s helping a small child cross the street. They both know better.

What Will is really asking—don’t call him, not *him*—sits unspoken between them.

‘I’ll drive you home,’ Sutcliffe says. ‘Come on.’

He leads Will into the house, through the dark corridor cluttered with sports gear and shoe boxes, and across the hall into a garage that smells like gas and fresh paint. He helps Will into the passenger seat and he gets him a blanket from the trunk, then does up his seatbelt for him, too, all the while never meeting Will’s scattered gaze.

They pull out into the street, the engine the low hum of an expensive machine. Sutcliffe cranks up the heating and he turns on Will’s seat warmer.

For a while, they drive. Will is lulled by the purr of the engine and the sway of the carriage at each turn; he is lulled by the mellow voices of the late-night radio and by the stretch of road ahead. What if he did nothing? What if Sutcliffe drove on forever, past when Randall had got tired of following, past when the fullest gas tank could conceivably last them, past the edge of the night.

It could come to be, Will thinks, this journey without destination. After all, Sutcliffe has never asked him where he lives.

At the next intersection, they take not the road that cuts further into the woods, but that toward the lights of central Baltimore.

And Will realizes he is being delivered straight into the mouth of the beast.

It is a cold thing, conviction.

Will is convinced in that moment that the man sitting next to him is going to die tonight.

‘Not home,’ he whispers, too soft at first to be quite heard.

‘Sorry, what?’

‘Not home. Don’t take me home.’

‘Why not home?’

Will looks out the window, feigning distraction.

‘Will. Why don’t you want to go home?’

‘He’s there.’

He hears Sutcliffe swallow audibly around his own shame. Is he fearful of Hannibal, Will wonders, or is this old buddy loyalty? Does it matter? ‘Doctor Lecter’s there?’

‘Uh—what?’

‘Doctor Lecter. Hannibal. He’s at your house?’

Will jerks a nod. From the corner of his eye, he watches Sutcliffe’s fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

‘Where do you live, Will?’

‘Wolf Trap. It’s near D.C.’

Sutcliffe nods, sighs, and turns the car around.

The lights of the city dim and die away behind them. The car’s display reads two forty-three in a font that’s only just big enough for Will to read. The car has one of those glassed-over roofs, and when Will angles his head back he can see the first flakes of snow making their way through the cooled air, only to melt into strings of water on the glass.

‘Left,’ Will says as they approach another crossing. There are trees on either side of them, but where the road splits left, it disappears into darkness.

Sutcliffe glances at the GPS. ‘No, that’s not—’

‘Turn left.’ Will looks at the rear-view mirror, where Randall’s truck is flashing its long lights. ‘Lose ’em.’

‘Lose—lose who—’

‘Truck behind us,’ Will explains with dead indifference. There’s no need to play fragile now, not when Sutcliffe’s about to feel plenty fragile himself. ‘Been following us until—when since that first intersection.’

‘Jesus.’ Sutcliffe’s staring at the rear-view mirror now, breathless and white. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yep.’

Sutcliffe jerks the wheel left. They glide sideways, carried with momentum, and speed deeper into the woods, taking turns at random, hiding into the night.

Once Will has determined they’re probably far enough out, he unbuckles his seatbelt and jumps.

The wheel slides in and out of his grasp. Branches and bushes crack in their way, beating against the windows. Sutcliffe is pushing and yanking, unsure whether to focus on throwing Will off or reclaiming control of the car. When he hits the brakes, he hits them *hard,* sending them skittering to a lurching halt a foot short of a tall pine, the girth of it more than enough to leave a sizeable dent.

‘What are you doing—get off me—look at what you’ve—’

Will gets off him. He pushes open the door; falls to his knees on the forest floor like a man just returned from months at sea. He is taking in lungfuls of air, choking on what smells and feels hot and metallic like blood but is only fear.

Sutcliffe has got out of the car, too, and is circling it now—why would he get out of the car? What idiot gets out of his car here, in the middle of the woods in the dead of night, when the blazing glow of the front lights is enough to coax any beast from its hiding place, when it will take perhaps another minute for Randall to find them—

He is making his way through to Will. He intends to help, he intends to soothe what must appear a stroke or an epilepsy attack or at the very least a meltdown—*fuck* his help, he wants only to heave Will upright and deliver him to Hannibal’s doorstep so he can go right back to not thinking about it, to pretending Will isn’t his responsibility, to telling himself that he facilitated but never encouraged, that none of this concerns him at all—

He’s close now, reaching out—

A hand on Will’s shoulder. The flick of a switch.

Will falls.

And as he’s falling, deep and dark and cold, as he’s falling he leaves all of the fear behind. He has no more room in him for fear. He has no more room in him at all, not for anything except

this.

Rage.

It is not blinding: for the first time tonight, he sees clear. It is not cold: the world is cold but the rage burns, the rage is the one thing keeping off the ice. It does not choke because he breathes, with no need for count, he breathes full and easy and thoughtless, and he throws himself on the man before him and he hits his head on the stone once and again—and his nails peel off ribbons of skin, his teeth take off mouthfuls of flesh—he spits them out into the faint film of snow on the frosted earth—

'Will!'

He doesn't stop. He is no one's man now: he is neither Randall's bait nor Hannibal's charge, he is not even Will Graham's Will Graham, not as he stands now. Not drenched in the blood of a man too weak to fulfil his vows, not stuffing the fingers of the man's quivering hand deep into his mouth, deep until he's choking on them, and *biting down*—the bones cracking between his teeth, the fragments shifting against one another, trapped in bags of skin.

He doesn't stop. He is wrenched away, ripped from his prey, thrown—he catches himself on his hands, breathing hard, blinking into reality the sight of the body before him, torn open and bleeding and shaking with the last—dead.

Dead.

He looks up at Randall. He can hear the rumble of the truck's engine, still harking behind them. Randall is running his hand through his hair and tugging, over and again.

'Hair,' Will croaks. 'You're dropping evidence.'

Randall stares at him. He has gone paler than the body.

'Evidence,' he repeats dully. The panic's etched into his chin: it looks like he might cry or he might strike, only he'd have to come closer to Will to do the latter and it doesn't seem like he much wants to. 'Will—look at this!'

Will looks. When he does, he relives every bite, every blow, sees and feels it all as though he'd been there—and he *was* there. He did this. He'd emptied all of his pockets and he'd been as careful as he could, but that was never going to be enough, not after the wraith had marked him as his own. And worse of all, it is different this time: he is no longer lost to the sands of his own ignorance, he can no longer claim innocence, not while he could repeat back what happened with such astute precision.

This, finally, makes it all real.

Maybe there never were two Hannibals: the Hannibal Will knows from his bedside and the Hannibal Will knows from the dusty files in a cardboard box. Maybe there only ever were two Wills: the one who forgets and lives, and the one who can't stop.

‘It was supposed to be clean!’ Randall is walking now, closer to the body then away, a man unsure if the ice will hold him. ‘You were supposed to wait, Will, I was supposed to kill him clean—clean like he would do, and the hair, Will—he’s going to have your teeth marks all over! Your spit, your blood, *God*—’

He is right. It seems as though neither of the two Wills is very good with planning.

‘Fuck,’ Will mutters into his shoulder. He can’t stand to look at the body anymore. ‘I—I’m sorry—’

‘Why would you—God!’

Will snorts. Tears are itching at his eyes, but he doesn’t want them falling. This couldn’t have possibly gone worse. He’d worried it would go to shit, of course, but he’d worried that he’d forget which way to go or what to say; that he’d get cold feet or that Randall would lose it or that he’d get it into his head again to do a one-eighty and—

Oh—wait.

Wait.

‘Randall.’

Randall doesn’t appear to have heard him, so Will says it again and louder.

‘Randall, take my phone.’

‘What?’

‘In my—the, what is it? Robe. Help me up.’

Randall does. He walks Will back to the truck awkwardly, trying not to touch any of the places that gleam red.

‘Can you, uh—’ Will indicates the discarded robe with an elbow. He gestures by way of explanation to his hands, stained red and brown. ‘The burner. Yeah. Take me home—’

‘Like this? Will, you need a—an industrial-grade wash—’

‘Yeah, fine, so your place first. And then home. And then wait for the morning, yeah? Because he can’t—Hannibal has to see I’m with him so he doesn’t think it’s me. He *can’t* think it’s me, Randall, or—I’m there alone, do you understand? You have to wait.’

Randall’s looking at him like Will is a madman. ‘Wait to do what?’ he asks weakly.

‘Text him,’ Will says quickly, the gears of his mind turning for once without cracks or stumbles, as though someone’s poured a bucket of oil down one ear. ‘Text him and say—say you’re taking his doctor friend for a drive.’

Chapter End Notes

Best. Plan. Ever.

Next week, Will learns something that makes him reconsider his approach.

Thank you for reading!

The Thorn

Chapter Summary

Will takes a look at a crime scene photograph and makes a startling realization.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Thorn.

He meets Randall halfway across the lawn, dogs in tow. It feels safer this way, bracketed by the pack on each side; a fleeting comfort in the face of his latest fuck-up. The sun is strong on the tip of his head but the snow at his feet remains unconcerned. Betty is lifting her paws high in the air, alternating between hopping and tiptoeing, lost as to how to avoid getting the slimy wet all over her.

It's only been a couple hours since they separated. Randall looks mellowed by it, his brows soft and hopeful. He looks like he hasn't slept.

'I saw the car leaving. Did he get the text?' He hunches in the snow so that Buster can sniff at his hands. Will feels a flash of warmth, fast setting in him. 'Is he gone?

'He's gone,' Will confirms. 'But he called someone to come watch me. You can't stay long.'

Randall's breath leaves him roughly. He hands Will the burner phone.

'Are you sure this is going to work? Will, what if—'

'He doesn't know who—' Will searches for words, but none seem quite fit for his purpose: how does he explain to Randall something as obvious as that Hannibal *must* fix this? That this is entirely the point of him? 'He doesn't know who sent him the text, who killed Sutcliffe, he doesn't know anything. He's not—not get—going to get the FBI involved. He'll get rid of the body.'

'I don't like this.'

'You don't have to like it. When you killed her—the, uh, the patient you killed—he helped you get rid of the body then, didn't he?'

Randall glances off to the side. It occurs to Will that Randall might have preferred to dispose of Sutcliffe's body himself, might have preferred to not have panicked. 'He did,' he grumbles, self-aware. 'But he was supposed to take the fall for this. That was the whole plan —what's the plan now?'

What Will wants now is, primarily, a break. Last night's adrenaline is still sizzling in his muscle, each sinew spent and aching. More importantly, he needs time to wrap his head around what his hands and his teeth have done, and how bad or good exactly he feels about that. A week minimum, he imagines; at most, a lifetime.

He doesn't think Randall will like that answer very much. He isn't by nature a patient man. 'I'll find someone else,' Will promises. 'Someone else that fits the bill. Maybe a patient? Someone close to him. You have to give me time, Randall.'

Randall crosses his arms at his chest, not quite cradling himself. 'I don't like it that you're here with him, alone,' he says. 'It's not right.'

'I'll be fine,' Will lies. 'I'll get in touch soon.'

Before he leaves, Randall casts one final look at Will, then pats his shoulder oddly, tentative. It's enough, this touch: Will feels again the rise of warmth in him, threatening to spill over, and he presses his eyes shut to block it out. He can't go and start feeling for Randall. He's in no position to care about anyone other than himself, damn it—not now.

Beverly arrives shortly after. Will remembers her from the hospital, and perhaps vaguely from some ill-defined before: her voice, how her eyes on him feel, the way she moves.

'Hey there, Will.' She waits politely at the threshold, giving him time to move aside and indicate he wants her in. 'You're looking alive.'

'What's your last name?'

'Huh? Oh—Katz. Beverly Katz.'

'Yeah. Didn't remember that.'

Beverly's teeth show when she grins. Will remembers the sight of those, too. 'Damn. I should have made up a better one then. Beverly Graham—pretended I'm your long-lost twin. Would you have bought that?'

'Probably.'

Once they're inside, Will hesitates. Where do you put guests? The study, he supposes, in an armchair. Coffee—he can make that. It'll save him having to talk to her for a while. Yes: put her in the study and make his escape. He can quote caffeine drop after and head straight to bed.

'You want coffee?'

'Sure.' With her chin, she points to Hannibal's mattress, laid out on the floor by the fireplace. 'That's one big dog you got.'

'Hannibal sleeps there.'

‘Does he? I thought maybe it’s whoever wins the best boy award that week. Look, that one’s usurping.’

Zoe has indeed climbed on top the pillow, licking at the remains of Hannibal’s scent. Will clicks his tongue at her, which does precious little.

‘Can’t let them on the beds,’ he tells Beverly as he picks up the offender. He resists planting a kiss on her little head. ‘They have to be trained so that—if I give them to—adopt.’

‘But look at those eyes—you’re really going to say no to that?’

‘Yep.’

‘You’re a stronger man than me, Graham. I’ve brought some muffins from the Quantico shop—hopefully you’ve forgotten they’re shit.’

‘I have.’

‘Good. You need help with the coffee?’

‘Maybe with the—how much—measuring.’

‘Lead the way then.’

They have the coffee and muffins in the study, and then Will naps, and then they take their late lunch in the study, too, a languid feast of breakfast leftovers arranged whimsically on the most mismatched plates they can find. Beverly tells him about the people he used to know at Quantico and about the classes he used to teach. She asks about his days and his health and Hannibal. Then, she breaks to do work or take a phone call or catch a passing dog and pet them silly, and Will can close his eyes and drift pleasantly: on the feeling of hunger satisfied, companionship without challenge, the brightness of the world out the window.

Something buzzes against Will’s skin.

‘Will.’

‘Huh?’

‘I think that was your phone.’

Will yanks the burner out of his pocket. He has completely forgotten—

Taking your doctor friend for a drive, Randall wrote this morning. It feels like a dream that he would have done that; the whole of last night feels unreal.

It is real. Hannibal’s just written back.

Quite the drive it was.

‘Hannibal checking up on us?’

‘What—no, no, it’s—’ lie, goddammit, it’s not that hard ‘—yeah. He’s going to be a while longer.’

‘Is he? Oh, sorry—that’s Jack.’ She’s pulling out her own phone, already rising to her feet. ‘Looks like neither of us can be trusted alone for more than a few hours. Give me a moment.’

She steps out onto the porch, blazer halfway up one arm. She doesn’t want Will overhearing this conversation. He can’t find it in himself to wonder why.

The burner sticks to the cold sweat on his palm. He has the sort of feeling that makes the world seem shallow: there is only what he sees immediately before his eyes and only the rush of blood to his face.

He shouldn’t reply, should he? He should never have texted Hannibal from this number in the first place. He would not have done so if he hadn’t been possessed by the vengeful spirit that’s been squatting in Hannibal’s murder basement. He is not possessed now: it is not as though he would know what to write.

Only perhaps if he does answer, he might be able to find out whether Hannibal has in fact got rid of the body.

I enjoyed it, he types back with surprisingly steady fingers.

That much is clear. Though next time, you should consider cleaning up after yourself.

Did you clean?

Yes.

What would the vengeful spirit say now? Will doesn’t know.

There you are then, he settles on, because it sounds the most neutral of his options.

This time, I did. But I hope you will not make this a habit.

Don’t want me getting used to it for when you’re not around anymore, do we

He’s not sure where it’s coming from, the sudden bitterness. It might be just that—

Is that a threat, Will?

The phone hits the floor. Buster jumps and barks, teeth at the ready. Will plasters himself to the back of the chair as though that way he could escape, as though he could fade into the upholstery and not be seen—*fuck.* Fuck, how does he know? How—

‘Will?’

Will snatches the phone from the ground. He skips two steps at a time running upstairs, he trips and wrenches his wrist something horrible, he grinds his teeth and he flings himself on the cool bathroom tile—Buster’s come in with him, still agitated, and Will pulls him close.

Together, they rest against the shut door. Buster's chest expands at a similar rate to Will's, both their breaths high and wheezing.

What does he do now? What the hell is he supposed to do now? Does he call Randall? He could. But then what will Randall do?

A knock on the door. 'Everything alright there, Will?'

He pulls his left sleeve up and buries nails into the exposed skin. When the pain reaches a point that makes his legs want to kick out against the floor, he manages,

'I'm fine,' and it sounds almost normal.

'I was just on the phone with Jack. He's going to come by to bring me some files, okay?'

It is not okay: panic bubbles in Will at the prospect of an unexpected guest now, of all times, and without Hannibal even knowing that they're coming. It is by far the last thing he should be worrying about, only at least he knows *how* to worry about it. Worrying about this other, real thing is not his life here, it is not within him to—why would he ever get any of this started? Why couldn't he just shut up and forget? Why not do the one thing he is good at?

'I need your help,' he whispers into the air, feeling like the fool he is. 'Please.'

No one answers.

On trembling legs, Will lifts himself up along the wall. When his line of sight has been raised enough that he can glimpse the reflection he makes in the mirror, he stops, half up the wall, back to the cool tile, palms spread out to maximize contact. If he sees too much, he can always sink back into the wall. If he can't take it, he will fall through to the other side.

In the mirror, a set of dark eyes regards him. Will cannot decipher the expression in them; he is not sure he wants to.

'I need you to go downstairs in my place.'

The Other Will is silent. Will wonders if it is a failure of imagination or a sign of returning sanity.

'Will you go downstairs?'

Nothing.

Ever so slowly, unsure of whether he is breaking the spell or casting it, Will makes himself nod his head, just once—and his reflection follows suit.

He goes downstairs on legs that are not his own.

He doesn't offer Jack coffee. That is not a thing he does. He abstains from talking, too, because to talk might be to reveal himself, and the last thing he wants is to be revealed before the time is right. He allows Jack Crawford to think he is half-mute and half-insane, he ignores

Beverly's worried glances, and he keeps a distance from the dogs out of respect, if nothing else, for the trust they place in their owner.

'Beverly tells me you're doing better, Will.'

He says nothing.

'We miss you at the BAU.'

He clears his throat. He mutters a reply.

'What was that?'

'I don't know.'

Confusion creases Jack's brow. 'You don't—'

'I don't know what that is.'

'What—what is what, Will?'

'The thing you said.'

'The BAU?'

He nods quickly, jerkily, like a man with no control over his own limbs. It is surprisingly difficult to make it come out anything short of artificial—but awkwardness is hardly a failing here.

Jack sighs. Jack can see this is going to take some time: good. The more he draws it out, the more likely it is that they'll both be here by the time Hannibal gets home, and if they're here, Will is safe.

'We've been investigating this case,' Jack begins, slowing his speech and paying mind to all his consonants. He should be hanged for it. 'We found a body a while ago at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum and we've had no real leads since then. We think it might be the work of the Ripper. You remember the Ripper, Will?'

'Jack,' Beverly cuts in, but he holds up a hand only—it stops her words, though not her glare.

'I remember the Ripper.'

'Of course you do,' Jack praises. 'I was wondering if you could take a look at the file. I'm getting a little desperate here.'

'I can't believe this,' Beverly mutters. 'Seriously—'

'Am I getting paid for this?'

Jack looks up from where he is already laying out the crime scene photographs. The desk in the study isn't large enough to fit them all.

‘I’m on medical leave,’ he reminds them, wrapping Will’s arms around Will’s chest. ‘Feels a little exploitative if you’re not going to give me money.’

That makes Jack grin. ‘He has a point. You got any cash, Katz?’

‘Do I—unbelievable!’

‘What’s your hourly rate, Will?’

Money holds little interest, really, and he doesn’t do numbers. But it might come in useful should he ever need a last-minute ride the hell away from here.

‘How much is a ride?’

‘Ride to where, Will?’

‘Where I want.’

‘Alright, how about this—I give you whatever Katz has in her wallet and we’ll call it even?’

Beverly hands him three wrinkly bills. He is about to put them in his pocket when he realizes they’re likely to be forgotten and end up in the wash. He slides them into the drawer of the desk instead, under the stack of papers Will Graham once placed there.

He looks at the crime scene photos. He remembers how to look: you must lengthen your gaze, you must abandon the body you inhabit and the heart that beats your own rhythm, you must fall headfirst into another’s story and listen to what it tells you.

It tells him nothing.

He tries again, frustration rising in him until it chokes—nails dig into skin, knuckles whiten, Winston whines placatingly—Jack’s eyes cut to him, Beverly can’t decide whether it’s safe to touch him—it is not, it is not, it is not—he sees the myriad colours before him, the dead of meat and the life of blood, and the emptiness where the man’s brain and gut used to sit, the butterflies, too, but who the fuck cares?

He is not the ghost of Will Graham past. He is an echo, a smear, a fading scream: he is a desire unfulfilled and a yearning denied. He is incapable.

He has empathy for no one and nothing, after all, except perhaps the other in him.

He blinks, exhales, and he lets go.

And when he does, when Will resurfaces—blinking, gasping, sputtering—the house resumes its beat, the walls claim again their colour, the dogs come to sniff and lick at his hands. The contours of the world fill once more: Will is in the study, the wood of the desk beneath his hands warm from touch, Jack Crawford’s breath warm on the back of his neck. The windows are rattling in the wind.

Will has barely time to settle back into himself when he catches sight of the photo directly before him, and, without needing to think about, he falls again: without, this time, rather than within.

—he has brought him here semi-conscious. The man was tripping over his own legs, eager for guidance, easy to direct. He has laid him out on the floor and cut into him with instruments made ready for the occasion; they will be cleaned later in the deep steel sink in his basement, disinfected, wiped with a wine cloth from lingering fingerprints for no reason other than that they look ugly. He has emptied the man of all that is his: his gut, his liver, his kidneys and heart. He has cut and drilled into the skull to scoop out the brain with careful fingers, so it would not spill on the carpet.

Made empty of who he is, the man can be left to rest now. Glazed with sugar and the sun that spills through the windows, his carcass will attract butterflies. It will give them sustenance, warmth, light. In death if not in life, Hannibal made him for it.

'Will?'

Hannibal's hands are pulling out the guts, tugging at the end of the intestine as it snags on something—the liver, the kidney, the heart—

'Will!'

And Will understands: Hannibal was going to leave him.

He was going to empty Will of all that Will was and he was going to discard him like an old toy: plush littering the floor, button eyes pinging off furniture, I don't want it anymore it's broken. But *you* broke it—

If Will pressed down on his stomach, it would cave right in. Inside his cranium there is a void, sucking in air through the ears and nose. His skull cracks at the pressure. Will Graham has been emptied and he has been laid to rest—and at the Smithsonian Natural Museum, he has been given a funeral, a tribute, and an end.

Will has been acting under the assumption that he has been Hannibal's plan all along. He has thought that Hannibal let Will Graham succumb to an illness that wasn't meant as an end but a sieve. Nothing easier in the world than to slice the throat of your enemy, but to take him and leash him and set him in your lap to pet and tend to—to make him feel as though he is lucky to feel your hand—well, that is not only a challenge, but a much greater victory when achieved. And so, the challenge and the victory is what Hannibal has wanted all along, because he has wanted Will all along: this Will.

That is what Will *thought.*

He has no need for conjecture anymore. In this photograph, he has a confession spelled out in Hannibal's hand: Will Graham was a threat to be eliminated and I have eliminated him. It makes sense, of course—it makes so much more sense to walk away once the deed was done.

Why didn't he?

Sheets flutter and fall to cover Will. The mattress sinks beneath him. There is no time and there is no space. Will no longer knows what he has done, who he has been—he is again only a man who remembers nothing. A man who cannot make it alone.

Someday, perhaps, someday he could; he wants to believe it is so, he wants to believe he is going to get better. He is not better enough yet. Everything that he has done over the past weeks, everything he has succeeded in finding and securing and killing, it has all been the labour of this Other, this foreign being pulling at his strings. Though Will Graham might have lived with the Other's seed in him, Will himself does not—that is not who he is anymore.

He cannot allow himself to be abandoned.

'—stole brains from their skulls. He had quite the collection lining the walls of his office, only the pinkest and loveliest specimens. And one day, the thief heard of a man whose brain was pinker and lovelier than any in his possession. The loveliest of them all, people said, and the thief immediately wanted it.'

Will stares at the elbow that creases his pillow. When the elbow shifts, so does the mattress, with a weight that isn't Will's own. He glances down, surprised to find Winston's eyes peeking out from under the blanket. He's not supposed to go on the bed.

'The thief found the man and cut his head open as he slept. But he didn't know that this man's brain was under the protection of a famous hunter, or that the hunter was guarding the man's house that very night from behind the tree line. The hunter saw the thief leave the house with the brain tucked under his arm. He pursued him over ravines, lakes covered in ice, over snow tall as man.'

Will presses his face into the fur on Winston's scruff. It makes his eyes water and his nose twitch.

'He chased him for days. Then he chased him for weeks. Finally—'

Will is saying something. He can't hear what he's saying, not even in his head. The mattress shifts again. He catches a note of Hannibal's breath on his cheek.

'What is that, Will? Dogs? We've already counted them.'

Will says nothing.

'Did the hunter have a dog?' Hannibal guesses next. 'I suppose he might have done. He is like you after all, in some ways more than others. What's his dog's name?'

'Buster,' Will mutters. Buster likes hunting.

The breath on his cheek comes on stronger, a tiny gust of laughter. 'Buster. I see why it took them so long to catch up to the thief.'

A shiver goes through Will. He digs himself deeper into the fur, into the sheet, into the heat of Winston's panting body. He swallows jerkily, too fast, trying not to be sick.

‘Eventually, the thief collapsed from exhaustion.’ The bedframe screeches when Hannibal leans back against it. ‘The hunter was counting on this. He never tires of the chase until the chase is done. And when this chase was done, he killed the thief for his impudence in daring to touch something so lovely—he broke the fingers in the hand that held the brain, broke them one by one between his teeth.’

Winston gives a huff.

‘Should we let Winston go? I think he wants his own bed now.’

Will relaxes his hold in increments. Once Winston gets that little bit of freedom, he gives Will’s face a final lick and wiggles off the bed. His paws patter away into the dim of the house. They’re in Wolf Trap, Will thinks distantly. They must be.

He must have lost time again. He must have blinked out of existence.

Now that his face isn’t full of dog, he looks around the room. He doesn’t see Beverly or Jack, and terror grips him—but it doesn’t sound as though Hannibal believes Will killed Sutcliffe, does it? In the story, Will acts merely the part of victim, of the man who has his brain stolen away. It is the hunter, which he knows is code for the Other Will, who pursues and exacts revenge—

Hannibal called Will by his name in that final text he’s sent.

Maybe—just maybe, though it sounds impossible—maybe Hannibal meant the *Other* Will.

Will turns on the pillow to get a better look at the cut of Hannibal’s chin, hovering above him. That’s insane. The Other Will is a story and he is Will’s nightmare, Will’s hallucination, Will’s demonic possession. He doesn’t exist in the material world in any capacity—even Will knows that much. Could Hannibal have gone temporarily insane, then, stranded in the woods with Donald Sutcliffe’s body and the winter twisting its grip on the skies above him?

Hannibal has killed dozens of people and then he has *eaten* them, and then he has come to FBI profiler Will Graham to chat about it. Temporary insanity really shouldn’t be that surprising.

‘Another story?’

Will nods against the pillow, eyes fixed on the angle of the chin where it meets the lobe of Hannibal’s ear. Hannibal’s eyes are shut loosely. There’s motion under the eyelids: he’s leafing through story threads, searching for an image, a beginning.

‘I will tell you about the boy who couldn’t sleep.’

Hannibal slides down the headboard, sagging. He has spent the day digging and hauling. It shows in the shoulders and in the neck.

‘He had his first lover and his first sleepless night in an apartment like a palace, looking over bustling orange streets. The streets smelled like sweet alcohols, like flour and ham—and the gilded frames and knobs inside the palace smelled metallic like blood.’

The smell drifts into the room. Will can see the boy, all bone and angles, odd and outlandish even when backdropped by Turkish rugs and Renaissance portraits. The boy lies prone in lavish sheets, still bare from before, letting the breeze from the window cool the red of skin.

'His lover slept, but the boy could not. He tossed and turned; something poked at his side whichever way he lay. He went through every stitch of the sheets looking for standing threads, for lost coins or buttons, but he found nothing. He got under the bed to check for broken boards but he found none. He tiptoed into the kitchen and he brought back a knife; he sliced through the mattress, he felt around, he pulled out flurries of down, but he found nothing sharp or rough. Just softness.'

'Prince and peapod,' Will whispers. Hannibal brushes the hair from his forehead.

'He stacked up pillows and blankets. When he lay on top of them, he could have touched the ceiling if he'd raised his arm, and the palace had high ceilings. But the thorn was still there, and still he couldn't rest.'

Will's mouth is dry when he speaks. 'Where was the thorn?'

'Where do you think?'

Will bites his lip, considering.

'Inside him,' he says softly. 'Does he still have the knife?'

Hannibal beams down at him. 'Yes. He took the knife and he made a cut across his stomach. He pulled out the long snake of gut, the liver, the kidneys. He kept going until he was empty, until there was nothing in him except space. And finally he slept.'

As they lie together after, Will cries. Once he has cried, he feels as empty as the prince from the story, wrung-out and restful. They never lie together like this; Will understands that if they did, he would never have called Randall and he would never have killed Sutcliffe. But they lie like this now because Will is done anyway. He is done.

He wonders if Hannibal pulls out his own guts to lie with him. Will hopes he does not, though it seems likely. He would prefer him whole: it is too late for Will, but perhaps not so for Hannibal.

Once Hannibal has slipped away to his own bed, Will rolls over to nestle in the place left warm and soft from the weight of his body and waits for sleep to claim him. He does not expect to wait long: with his eyes closed, he can see already the kaleidoscopic shapes and hums that exhaustion paints on his eyelids. And yet, the longer he lies alone in the dark the more alert he becomes. The sheets slide against his thighs with a rush of air. Time feels wrong again, stretched around the edges. Hannibal is too quiet to be asleep—Will knows he is listening, knows that he can hear it every time Will shifts against the mattress, that he can hear it when Will props up a foot, when he rolls over onto his stomach. He can hear it all.

A sound builds in Will's throat, too new for definition. Will wants suddenly to hitch his leg a little higher, press the knee up to his side. He feels in the muscle that it would like the stretch,

so he does so slowly, carefully, skin sliding against the sheet with only a susurration of movement. The stretch presents only a momentary relief. Soon, no relief is to be found in the things that seem like they should bring relief. Every motion, Will knows, every change of position, will only make it worse.

Jesus. He hasn't spared a single thought for anything of the sort since the hospital, not once—oh, he would have slept with Hannibal if Hannibal had approached him about it, but the hottest showers and the freshest sheets have never made him warm just there, low in the stomach—not even any of the touches he's been so careful to avoid. Not until tonight.

Is this what it takes to get your libido back, he muses bitterly, drawing his legs straight again, so straight and so close that he's pressed into the mattress just a little, the duvet trapped between his thighs. A murder? That's what you needed?

Then again, maybe it isn't the murder. He doesn't care to think about the murder now; when he tries, he thinks only of Hannibal after, wrenching open the collar of his coat, neck slick with sweat, arms straining from the weight of the shovel. Disturbing on its own, that this is what gets him—

A dog snores and Will uses the opportunity to roll his hips, biting sound into the pillow.

Maybe not the murder then. Maybe just the fact that he's started eating again.

The image of Hannibal knee-deep in another man's grave fades, and Will thinks instead of him sitting against the headboard, close enough to touch but not touching—his voice as he tells his stories—

Like the prince and the peapod, Will is empty of all gut. All the agency, all the anger, the rage and absolute terror, the sheer *terror* of doing this alone, all of those belong to the Other Will. He is not that Will now. Here in Wolf Trap, Will is pure.

Here in Wolf Trap, Will is only whatever Hannibal wants; it's what he needs to be to keep himself safe. He might as well embrace it, just for now. Just until he is better enough.

Carefully, he sits up. The shape of Hannibal on the floor moves. Even halfway to sleep, the way he moves is graceful, measured. *Hunting.*

Will crosses his ankles on the bed until the heel of one foot is as close as it can go. It presses —the toes curl.

'You awake?'

'Do you need anything, Will?'

Will nods into the dark even though Hannibal can't see it.

Then, he slips out of bed—and goes to do what needs to be done.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I might be able to get another chapter out by the end of the day, actually, so keep an eye out for that ;)

The Reflection

Chapter Summary

Will progresses in recovery. Corpses and murderers interfere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Reflection.

The tape measure slides against the turn of Will's bicep. The cool metal on the tail-end kisses a shiver into the curve of his elbow.

'You ever wonder why you lived?'

'Why I lived?'

'Yeah.' Will swallows against the press of Hannibal's knuckles into the dip of his throat. The tape twists around his neck like a collar, too-tight, digging into skin. His next statement comes out rough. 'People don't. You know? People routinely die of the shit I had. How come you get led out the woods and not someone else?'

Hannibal considers this. 'I have never asked myself that question,' he admits finally. 'I remember that my aunt and various counsellors my uncle employed tried to tease some version of survivor's guilt from me, but I never felt such a thing. It always seemed natural to me that I should survive.'

Of course it did.

'But I suppose it comes down to the deal made with our king of the woods, doesn't it?' The smile that plays on Hannibal's lips grows, bleeds into his voice. 'As the story goes. Did we ever settle on what exactly that deal entailed?'

'That's what I'm trying to figure out.' So far, evidence would suggest that for Will it was to unearth some deformity in him, let it chomp on a man until he was dead, and dream sweaty nightmares about it after. He has no idea what it would have been for Hannibal.

The tape slips down his chest, teasing at a nipple. 'Feels like I shouldn't need to be naked for this,' Will argues.

'And you are not.' Hannibal slips a thumb between the sharp point of Will's hipbone and the waistband of his boxers to illustrate the point. 'Technically. I am only trying to get exact measurements—it's standard procedure.'

‘Yeah? This what you tailor does to you?’

‘Of course; routinely.’

‘Where d’you find him—Craigslist?’

Hannibal’s shirt tickles down Will’s back. A metallic clink as the tape hits the floor—Will has a flash of hope that Hannibal might have given in to the teasing, but no, he’s only moving onto the legs, his hands ghosting over Will’s thighs to find his spot. Will lifts himself on tiptoes, forcing the knuckle to press into his balls.

Hannibal smacks him, which he must know is not helping his case.

‘Your tailor do that to you, too?’

‘No. I stay still.’

He doesn’t *actually* want Will to stay still. He never wants that. If Will stays still, Hannibal cannot force, cajole or else plead him into stillness, and things achieved without challenge are of little value to Hannibal Lecter. Will knows this. He knows when to lean in and lean back; he knows when to stop and he knows when not to stop. He knows that just because Hannibal wishes Will would touch him until he is made blind and deaf with release doesn’t mean that Hannibal *wants* Will to do that. Will had been a little worried, before, about how sex would go, when any experience he holds in his memory is hazy and possibly manufactured, and when his general motor skills have only recently surpassed those of a dexterous five-year-old. He should not have worried.

Perhaps that is why he lived when others didn’t, he thinks bitterly. Fuck the woods, there were never any woods. The Other Will is fiction, and reality is Hannibal doing a one-eighty and deciding to pull him out of death by the ears, all so he can jerk off to Will’s dried come every morning. Talk about a sense of purpose.

‘All done.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m going to bed.’

‘It is a quarter to nine—eight forty-five.’ Will no longer needs the clarification, but Hannibal clings to some of these habits. ‘Are you feeling unwell?’

In lieu of an answer, Will crosses the room and plants himself on Hannibal’s mattress. He pushes his knees apart, he throws an arm over his eyes—and in the darkness of it he thinks about how pathetic he is, how ineffectual, how primitive. How weak to it. Not even at the hospital, not even when he could not place events into chronological order and not even when he shook and swayed where he stood, not even then was he as weak as he is now.

After Will has come down Hannibal's throat, they lie together, too-close on the mattress but too-far at once. There is a misalignment between them. There is an oddness that Will thinks sometimes has the shape of his missing anger.

'I am glad you are coming with me,' Hannibal says into the darkness.

Will can't see his face. He wishes he could say something in response that would fill the silence fast caving between them. It is time to do so: his father told him, in a memory Will has recently recalled or recently imagined, that the hurt, the young and the wild all three are empty baskets, and that you must give and give, expecting nothing but a growl and a stiff tail, until one day the basket's full and you can eat from it. The metaphor didn't hold water; even as a child Will thought it would have worked better with a field of crops or a fishing pond yet unstocked. But it made him feel better about the stray dog they'd taken in never wanting to play with him, and gave him patience enough to wait until months later Jip jumped up on his twin bed and refused to leave again.

Hannibal's been putting eggs into Will's basket for months now, the good and the rotten. Stocking the pond. Sowing the wheat. A return on this investment should be imminent, but what he doesn't seem to realize is that Will's is a bottomless basket—a deep-water pond—a field cut through with cracks.

And so Will says nothing, only turns and nuzzles into his neck: weak.

'The longer you are there,' Randall told him over the phone last week, 'the worse it gets.'

'What gets?' Will spat at him then, because he refuses to believe Randall might see anything about him that is true.

'Don't leave me with this, Will.'

Will doesn't particularly wish to do so. The issue is the following: any further attempts at pleasing Randall in favour of pleasing Hannibal would require him to get chummy again with a fabrication of his own mind that used his hands and his teeth to murder a man just over a month ago. Will has since put on five pounds, gone off his steroids, realized that when your own delusions start to spill onto your serial killer cohabitant it might be time to put an end to them—he has even managed to walk the woods of Wolf Trap without spooking at the gentlest of sounds, at least so long as he has Hannibal with him.

Whatever distorted remnant of his illness the Other Will represented, he is gone from their lives. He no longer assumes control of Will's hands or mouth and he no longer visits him as he crosses the border between awake and asleep. Will is glad for it.

He is glad.

That night, Will dreams of beating to death the man between his thighs, and he dreams of the Other Will doing the same. Killing the man. Killing Will. Killing the people they might become.

Hannibal's pointless gallery opening is on Friday. The room is a thousand cheap glimmers and it is the knot that ties itself around Will's throat when he doesn't have enough space around him to breathe. Hannibal looks like something fallen out of a tear in the world, too bright and too airy between the sharp lines of the suit. He looks like something Will might enjoy if he didn't know everyone else was enjoying it, too—but the stares are everywhere, settling heavy on them and pressing until Will's heels dig into the carpet, until he wonders just how much shame it would bring him if he had a panic attack right here and now. Wonders if it might be worth it.

Will knows what the people feel because it creeps into him. It swells in him and colours his cheeks. Intrigue, envy, wanting. Rejection, hope, lust. A woman aspires to achieve the same level of social significance as Hannibal wields; another would prefer to fuck it out of him. Some doctor or other wants to cut into Hannibal and see what she'd find there. The bright-eyed patient that comes to chat with them wishes Will would die and hates himself for wishing it. Each individual desire preserves its own flavour, but they have this one thing in common: they all of them see Will as merely an extension of Hannibal's draw, a threat or challenge or bonus prize.

The patient's friend—Tobias, his name is, tall and dark and pressed—is different. He thinks Will poses no threat to his wanting: Will would like to kill him for that alone.

Will wouldn't. But it is nice to imagine that if he were the Other, he might have come here to hunt: he might have thought that the link between Tobias and Hannibal was too flimsy to be of any use, that should Tobias be found dead the shadow of suspicion wouldn't darken even a sliver of Hannibal's figure. He might have decided he could not care less.

Hannibal's hand is warm on Will's elbow, Will's shoulder, the small of his back. Hannibal would never know that the Other Will was here to hunt—he would in any case think Will has agreed to come for some petty, pathetic reason like wanting to please him—but what he would know, and knows now, is that everyone here wants him. That they none of them will ever think of Will Graham without thinking of Hannibal Lecter first.

Fuck that, the Other Will would say. Fuck you for enjoying that. Fuck you again for wanting to keep me tucked into a jetted pocket and fuck you for giving yourself to these people—to every pair of eyes on you tonight, to every whispered comment from every mouth—

'How are you doing, Will?'

'Great.'

Hannibal's eyes are fixed on some point in distant space, in the air that gleams golden. When the corner of his lips tugs up, it's for the whole room and not for Will. 'I can see that,' he says.

'Can you?'

'Yes. But if you need to step out to get some air—'

'You want to talk to me, you'd better fucking look at me.'

Hannibal looks. When their eyes meet, for a flash of a second Will remembers the heat of Sutcliffe beneath him, choking out the last of life, gasping his way into death.

Hannibal's pupils dilate. Will is struck mute by the fear that he might have glimpsed the memory, might have read it in the lines of Will's face. But then Hannibal smiles, and it's so wide and young and naïve that Will has to look away.

'Do you like playing at anger, Will?'

Will doesn't. He could point out to Hannibal that he doesn't like a whole lot about this life: he doesn't like the way the suit feels on him, he doesn't like the way the sun has taken to rising early and waking him, doesn't like that he killed Sutcliffe. Only none of it matters, since Will is better enough by now that he can wear the suit despite, and understands that the sun won't wait another half hour just to please him or that Sutcliffe won't rise from the dead at his bequest.

When he thinks about it—and he thinks about it a lot—Sutcliffe's death strikes him as preferable to the alternative. The alternative being, of course, if the good doctor had lived long enough to get a taste for experimenting with his patients' disturbed brain matter. Another alternative: Randall killing Sutcliffe instead. Randall carrying this new death on his conscience.

He forces himself to look at Hannibal again, properly: neck and chin, and the lip he's biting into from inside the mouth, and the cheeks, and the eyes that crackle and sear with how much he likes it when Will plays at anger.

Yes. It might be better this way, with Will doing the killing that needs to be done.

In any case, he is already doomed.

But for how much Will despises the coveting crowd, there is no one in this room who deserves to die, no one to spark in him that old rage that has once summoned the devil. The fantasy of who Will imagined he could be has faded. He is not a man who carries burdens anymore, and so he returns home empty-handed, as pathetic and as plotless as when he left it.

Stasis, that's what it is. A perfect stasis. Before, the steroid fog lay over it all—now he is clean and sharp-eyed, and still he does not break the string of days swollen on pretence.

And then one day, Hannibal tears the pretence loose.

Will is home alone when the dogs start barking at the grate of wheels he cannot hear yet. By the time he does, Zoe, Lana and Buster are positively mad with excitement, leaping over each other and scratching at the door, sure that at any moment Hannibal is going to step inside carrying large bags brimming with smells of meat and treats.

Hannibal isn't due for hours. Will suspects Randall instead, though prays to be proven wrong: he has nothing at all to say to Randall. After all this time, he worries that a poor choice of words might push him into doing something foolish.

Neither the dogs nor Will have it right.

Instead, Jack Crawford is stomping dirt off his shoes, expertly avoiding Will's questioning gaze.

'I'm glad to have caught you, Will,' he says without feeling. 'Mind if I come in?'

'Wait. I—come in. I need to call someone.'

He calls Hannibal.

He tells Hannibal to come.

Let Hannibal deal with Jack Crawford and whatever Jack Crawford wants. Will has lost all ability to be disappointed with himself.

'I wanted to apologize, Will,' Jack says once they're sat in the study, the waiting unspoken between them. 'For upsetting you the last time I was here.'

Will shrugs.

A painful grin distends Jack's face, ill-fitting and uncanny. 'And here I am, about to do it again. I was going to ambush you, I'll admit that. But it would make the apology a little meaningless, wouldn't it now? I'll wait.'

Will meets his gaze. He wonders what Jack can tell, looking at him.

'You don't owe me the consideration.'

'Sure I do. I just owe it first to the people whose lives I'm trying to save.'

'Last time you only had pictures of dead bodies to show me,' Will points out sensibly.

This time, the smile fits Jack's face just fine. Despite himself, Will relaxes slightly.

'The people whose lives I'm trying to avenge, then.'

Will owes something to those same people, he supposes. He might owe something to whoever it is Jack's here to avenge, too, and still he called Hannibal first.

'I have to feed the dogs,' he announces through a dry throat, though he has no idea whether or not it is indeed feeding time. 'You'll wait here?'

'I'll wait.'

When another set of wheels sounds on the driveway, poor Zoe gets a little too hopeful. Her leap across the door is met with Alana's empty arms—not even a single treat in her pocket—and she sags with disappointment. Hannibal couldn't leave it be, he had to go involve Alana despite being told not to, despite Will preferring to keep her as far as possible from this whole mess—

He has to remind himself she has survived Hannibal for years. She's going to survive him a while longer.

They wait all three of them in a terse silence broken up only by the dogs' breaths and feet. It is horrid. Will wishes he could disassociate from existence again and wishes he'd never got better enough for that not to happen anymore.

When Hannibal makes it at last, he is wearing Will's American Eagles jacket and the least convincing put-on innocence Will has seen in his life.

His musings on the reasons for both are interrupted when Jack says a name Will does not recognize.

'Who's Nick Boyle?'

Hannibal tells Will who Nick Boyle is. There's a ringing in Will's ears that comes half from fear, half from forgetting: he's been getting better and still he doesn't have a single memory of what might have happened to a man called Nick Boyle, or why his body digging itself out of the ground should be of any interest to Will.

'You think Will killed Nick Boyle.'

'No, I think Abigail Hobbs killed him.'

'What, she hunted down Nick Boyle *after* he attacked her and killed him? Is that the story? Or did she kill him back at the house and Hannibal didn't notice?'

'Will.'

Will gets as far as Jack's nose before he realizes he won't be able to meet his eye. He doesn't need to hear much more than that: he knows too well what he has done.

'Anything you remember.' Jack tempers his voice until it's fire-warm, bedside-manner-gentle. 'You weren't yourself, we know that. If anything happened—if you did anything—and I'm not saying that you did, but I need to make sure—that wasn't on you.'

Wasn't it?

It is all on Will, he thinks that night when he lies wide awake, Hannibal's fingers twitching around his bicep as he makes his way through a dream. The people Hannibal killed are dead because Will Graham had been too blind-sided to save them; the man whose body became feast for butterflies is dead because Will Graham had been too blind-sided to save himself. And Will might not recognize in himself the bloodlust of the Other, but should Jack Crawford ever find out about Sutcliffe's death he won't be allayed by talk of fairy-tale hunters. Neither will Hannibal—not for much longer.

In the dark of the ceiling, he can see life bleeding out of Nick Boyle's face. He knows it's not real. He understands, on a conscious level, that Abigail must have killed him; Hannibal has done an embarrassingly poor job concealing this fact. Will wonders why he's even bothered.

Does he really think Will would tell? Or does he suppose he would crumble under the knowing, too fragile to handle any nightmare that isn't his own?

Winston's paws click on the wooden floor. His breath is warm and heavy on Will's ear when he leans over, scenting him to quiet his distress. He needs little reassurance during the day, content to be petted but equally content to be left alone, but some nights something old and scabbed rises in him, and he will wake himself with a heart-breaking whine.

Hannibal's face tenses minutely when the blow of warm air tickles him, but he does not wake until Will is shifting out of his embrace. He makes a questioning sound from the back of his throat; in a moment, he'll be blinking himself aware.

'Sleep,' Will whispers. 'It's just Winston.'

He gets Winston back to his bed, then sits with him, running a hand over his back and belly. Winston's tongue peaks out to lick at Will's outstretched fingers.

'Aren't you a little too old to be waking me up in the night?' Will asks, pushing at him to make room on the blanket for more than a quarter of his ass. The floor is cold as anything tonight. 'You're too old to play the puppy.'

Winston huffs, sneezes, then gets back to licking.

Will wishes Abigail hadn't killed Nick Boyle.

Will wishes he had killed him instead.

It makes sense, doesn't it? If he'd killed him, then she wouldn't have to carry that weight on her forever, she could drop it down the well and leave feeling lighter. Abigail, Randall, Doctor Sutcliffe, even Hannibal, they are all filled in with colour and Will has this empty space, dark and darkening—all of their sins could disappear into it *easy.* Maybe that is what he was saved for. Maybe that is why he lived.

He sleeps in the following day, worn out by emotion and Winston's fears. Even once he rises, he feels only as though he is sleep walking. The sun touches his eyelids when he closes them against the fresh burst through the door, but he feels no warmth. Thaw has come; the ground is all clumps of wet dirt and the first coy sprouts of approaching spring.

Will lets the dogs out only to call them back inside. Hannibal has gone to visit Abigail and Will doesn't feel up to dealing with the dirt monsters the weather would inevitably return to him. A good plan for the day, he decides, is to stay cooped up inside, sheltered from whatever changes the world is going through, doing nothing and thinking of even less. None of it concerns Will: Will is not an agent. Will is a thing today. He is a fixture of the lounge, he is warm and he smells right, and he has a good lap for climbing on, but that is the sum of it.

He just about manages to convince himself of this when Hannibal comes back. He brings Abigail with him.

‘I thought we might take a walk,’ says Hannibal, making it sound entirely as though they had in fact decided this between them. ‘Will you join us?’

Abigail’s face is set into nothing. Will cannot tell whether she wants to walk, and neither is he confident he himself wants to walk at her side today—but he supposes it doesn’t matter very much. Hannibal wants to walk and he wants to pretend they want to walk all three of them: so that is what they shall do.

‘Uh, sure.’

The sun is on Will’s eyelids and the mud is on Will’s boots. He has little fear of the imaginary today: the forest is altogether too bright and open to tempt it. Abigail walks by his side and he finds it just fine, though he prefers it almost when she matches Hannibal’s step, falls into Hannibal’s silence, adjusts her shoulders to straighten like Hannibal’s shoulders are straight. There is something terse and unspoken between them, but if anything, it makes their connection feel sharper, better, worse—more inevitable. It makes it impossible to look anywhere else when they fall into stride, together but apart.

When he watches them, Will finds he no longer feels like he is a thing or like he is sleepwalking. Scrambling for self-definition strikes him as a waste of time and effort, honestly, when he can instead look upon something real that exists outside him, and feed on it: on when they sit on the porch together after their walk, on when their gazes shift and linger, on when an emotional upheaval he doesn’t understand draws an exhausted sort of calm to Abigail’s face, stained with tears, and to Hannibal’s, stained with relief.

When it is time for lunch, they sit on chairs pulled in close. Hannibal waits for Abigail to swallow her first bite, verifying for himself she is eating before he eats himself. The temperature is mild on the porch, the skies are clear. The dogs mill under their feet, watching for falling scraps.

Abigail eats. Hannibal eats. Will feels as though he needs no food anymore; he can feed on this only, forever.

By the time they lean back in their chairs to focus on digestion, the food is nearly all gone. In the fruit bowl at the centre of the table, a lonely tangerine smiles its vivid oranges.

‘Have it.’ Will pushes the fruit bowl toward Abigail.

‘I’m fine.’

He gives the bowl another push.

‘Let’s leave it for now,’ Hannibal says, eyes uncomfortably on Will. He is gathering up the plates. ‘Perhaps it will entice someone later.’

‘Have it,’ Will echoes, a coil tightening in his stomach.

‘Will—you can leave it here.’

‘No.’

‘No?’

Abigail’s gaze shies away. Will fights the need to blush crimson: he should have just pocketed the fruit and be done with it. When he tries to explain himself, he can think of no words to divert attention, no words but those that speak to the truth: since when has truth been so compelling?

Hannibal sets the plates back to the table, to free a hand with which he might scoop the tangerine from its bowl. He indents the waxy skin with a nail and starts peeling; in the absolute silence of the scene, Will can hear each grate of tearing.

‘I’ll take the plates.’

‘Thank you, Abigail.’

Having estimated Abigail is likely heading to the kitchen, the dogs file in after her. Hannibal and Will are left alone.

‘Would you like some, Will?’ Hannibal keeps his tone light, fooling no one.

Will breathes through the nose. He shakes his head.

‘Will you tell me what you are afraid of?’

Will shakes his head again.

Hannibal pries a part of the fruit out of the white veins of skin and puts it in his mouth. Will can tell only from the way his hands disappear from view and the way his hum sounds like he’s had to fit it around something in his mouth—the last thing he wants is to look up to Hannibal’s face.

‘I know he’s not real.’

‘I’m glad. That doesn’t mean you don’t fear him.’

Will shuts his eyes. His voice is the tinniest of whispers when he admits at last,

‘I want him to starve.’

‘Is that why you don’t like to leave any food in plain view?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will.’

Will looks at him. Hannibal’s lips glisten wet with juice. He shows him the empty peel; just the sight of it does away with some of Will’s fear.

‘Don’t drop the peel,’ he asks. ‘Put in the trash inside—in the bin with the lid.’

‘Better: we’ll candy the skin. It will make for a nice snack to take with us on a walk. That way, we can ensure we’ve eaten every last piece.’

Will gives a half-smile. ‘Fun project. Good thing it had no seeds.’

‘It did, actually—I swallowed them.’

That forces a laugh out of him, whistling through his still-tight throat. ‘My old man used to say I’d grow a tree out my stomach if I didn’t spit out my grape seeds. I’ll be picking tangerines out your ears soon.’

‘We will be making plenty candied skins, then.’ The playfulness fades from his voice halfway through the joke. ‘Increased anxiety and the occasional bout of paranoia are not signs you are regressing in recovery, Will. I would venture that a blurred line between truth and fiction has been part and parcel of your psychological make-up since long before your illness.’

Will nods, too ashamed to meet his eye.

‘But you know better than to keep any symptoms to yourself.’

‘You just said it’s not a symptom.’

‘You aren’t qualified to be the judge of that, Will.’

He is right. And if Will truly wanted to return to him what he has been given, both the good and the bad, he would tell him the symptoms so he might judge: tell him about his delusions, tell him about his memories, tell him he isn’t anything except what he thinks will stop Hannibal leaving him—tell him he knows what Hannibal has done and still can’t kill him for it.

‘Oh—and you are qualified, of course.’ Will swallows the bile, forces cheer into his voice, forces mockery onto his face. ‘Ultimate judge and expert in all things—with tangerines growing out his ears.’

When Hannibal laughs, he doesn’t sound like he has to force a thing. He sounds all at once too-much, too-bright, too-odd—too *obvious*—like something has budged in him and something else has come loose.

God, no.

Will is not made for love. That is not something he’s had to remember: it is fairly obvious.

Oh, Will can *love*, he can love just fine and hasn’t that been plain obvious, too? But he has no notion of how he could ever *be* loved in turn. It is deeper and it is darker now, but he doesn’t think the well that sits at his core is a thing recently dug. At the bottom, there has always been a sheen of undisturbed water and it has always served a perfect mirror. Whoever gazes down will see only themselves, reflected right back: their wishes, their yearning, whatever it is they would like to believe Will can be. It’s a hoax, through and through—you can’t love a thing that isn’t real.

What does it say about Hannibal, then, that this is what he sees at the bottom of Will's well? This helpless, needy, quick-tempered beast whose claws have been filed to bare skin?

'You don't mind that I'm going, do you?'

Later, Abigail accosts him on the back porch, where he is trying his best to stay out of their way and not think too much. He's made Hannibal give her the key to his house in Baltimore. That is the extent of what he can do for her at this juncture, so he sees little point in forcing her into further interaction.

'Of course not,' he says quickly. It's a lie, obviously. She can obviously tell.

'I should have visited earlier, but Wolf Trap's just a bit out of the way,' she says tightly. 'And it's not like I have a car or—'

Will imagines it's a bad idea to gift any teenage girl a car that costs more than college tuition. Still, he does briefly wonder what it would take to talk Hannibal into giving up his Bentley. They do have Will's truck, parked away in the shed and going to waste—they'd do just fine without.

Yet there is clearly something else, something better, than he can do for her.

'Don't do that,' he tells her without lifting his eyes from the bucket of dirty water—he's wringing the last of the dogs' dirt from the towel before he calls Hannibal to help him pour it out. 'Don't drop anchor just because you feel sorry for me.'

'I don't—'

'You don't feel sorry for me? That's cold. Look—it's shit to feel unmoored. I get that. But this isn't where you want your anchor to land, is it?'

Abigail's eyes cut to the kitchen window. From this angle, with the glass steamed from the hot water Hannibal's set to soak the dishes, they cannot tell whether he's there, or whether he is watching.

'There's a lake not too far from here,' Will changes tack. He doesn't want anchors and absences to be the last thing they talk about before Hannibal takes her away. 'It's nice there in summer. We could go when it gets warmer.'

'That sounds nice,' she says politely.

'Yeah.'

A creak of wood. Hannibal appears in the door, ready to go but settling in to stand and watch. Will's eyes meet Hannibal's over Abigail's head, and he thinks desperately how he'd take it all from them both, all their sins and secrets and fears, take them until he was leaden and until they were so light they could fly.

Once Hannibal and Abigail have left for Baltimore, Will locates his favourite blanket and settles for an afternoon nap. He is interrupted first by his bladder, second by Lana going

temporarily insane and knocking herself against a kitchen cabinet, and third by someone ringing the doorbell.

The blanket drags after him. This had better not be Jack again—Will needs about a year's break from any mention of corpses.

It is, as per Will's usual luck, significantly worse than that.

Randall's eyes are wide and his breaths are coming in quick. His face, the set of his shoulders, the way he grins at Will a full grin of sharp teeth, they each of them spell out excitement in bold.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Will snaps. 'You don't show up announced. What if Hannibal—'

'I ran into Doctor Lecter earlier.'

'Did you? That's great.'

It is not great at all, but Will is so afraid he doesn't know what he's saying. He doesn't want Randall here anymore. He wants only the peace he felt before, the sun, the looks. He wants to feel fed again. Or are those just Hannibal's fantasies, reflected back in Will's depth, unattainable for any longer than it takes to wake?

'I figured it out, Will.' Randall's joy is too thick for Will's fear to cut through. 'It's how you said, how we need to find someone who'd make sense as a victim, right? Someone close to him, someone that'd make them think of him.'

He is momentarily struck with the conviction that Randall is going to say Will's own name. But no—Will's been spinning wool over his eyes for weeks. Will is the perfect tool for the kind of revenge Randall wants, but Randall sees a reflection in him, too, and doesn't stop to consider what sorts of things others might see should they gaze down.

Randall doesn't say Will's name. Instead he says,

'We're going to kill Abigail Hobbs.'

And Will is paralyzed—of course this is *worse,* of course with his luck this is so much worse —

'No—no, Randall, we can't.'

'Don't worry. I know exactly how we're going to do it. We need to get her out of that hospital, but we can do that easy—you'll be bait again, won't you? You're very good at that part, Will.'

'Randall, we—what if Hannibal suspects—now that he's seen you?'

'So what if he suspects? If he comes after us, I'll kill him. I know you don't want that, but I'll do it if I have to, Will.'

‘No, Randall, you don’t—this is a bad idea—’

Randall lays a hand on his shoulder. The warmth of his palm is nauseating.

‘Will,’ he says seriously, with a softness people reserve for small children and spooked dogs. ‘I know last time went off-script. I know you’re scared, I know that—but I’ve read about it, you know? The thing you have, the brain disease, it can make you act out of control. That’s got to be scary. But now I know, see? I won’t let anything like that happen again.’

‘Yes, fine, but I don’t *want* this—’

‘I do.’

Their eyes meet. Randall’s gaze is steady.

Will swallows around a curse. This is his doing. He’s given Randall a goal and he’s given him a wounded animal in need of a muzzle exactly like Randall wanted, and now that Randall’s got what he wants he has achieved a confidence in himself that nothing Will says will shake.

What would Randall’s wounded animal say? What would Hannibal’s Will do?

Will swallows. He closes his eyes. ‘When?’

‘Not tonight. There’s going to be a storm tonight. But tomorrow—’

‘Day after that. What’s that?’

‘Monday?’

‘Yeah. I have therapy on Monday. Hannibal leaves me in D.C. You can come get me.’

Randall looks proud: whether of himself or Will is unclear. ‘Yes. And we’ll strategize.’

‘Sure. Just—you have to go now. Hannibal will be back soon—’

The hand returns to his shoulder—squeezes. Will is going to be sick after this, that much is sure.

‘Don’t worry. I’m going.’

Will forces himself to grin. ‘Yeah.’

There is something in this grin he doesn’t like. Something uncanny, something irking, something that feels wrong on his face. He’s not sure at first, but then his throat tightens, his jaw clicks—and he feels it, he feels the thing that was wrong climbing its way up the well.

Will walks back through the house. He ignores the dogs. He ignores the floorboards that creak the loudest. In a bowl on the counter sit the rest of the tangerines, the shape of them visible through the thin kitchen cloth which Hannibal used to hide them from stray eyes. It is

not so horrible to think they might have to be sacrificed, that the meats and produce sitting in the humming fridge might have to be laid as offering, that Will himself might be placed again into the hands of something less than real and more than horrendous—it is not so horrible, because it means Abigail Hobbs might live long enough to drop her anchor on solid ground.

Neither Randall's Will nor Hannibal's Will can help him now. It is so easy in the end to discard them. By the time the first of the tangerines has slipped down his throat, they have both faded away to near nothing, seedlings left in the soil to hibernate through winter. The expression on Will's face is setting into something new and alien.

The Other Will has this advantage: he knows what he wants and he doesn't care why. He wants, ultimately, to make Hannibal pay with blood and with tears, but if he wants this first, this spring of sustenance and pleasure, why should he not have it? Why should he not have, at his leisure, what is rightfully his?

For the Will he was a moment ago, hearing Abigail's name from Randall's mouth was worse.

For the Will he is now, it is *so much better.*

Chapter End Notes

Randall doesn't have a great time of it in the next chapter. Neither does Will, though then again when does he ever?

Thank you for reading!

The Split

Chapter Summary

Will wakes from the storm feeling distinctly not himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Split.

Morning drops on him like a leaden weight.

With a mute gasp, Will's eyes slice open, burning—his chest is struggling under the gravity of the thing on him—his limbs are stuck together with sweat, his stomach churns empty and tender—

The light reaches him, brighter than any dawn Will remembers.

He lies still, mindful of Hannibal's back rising gently in time with breath, there at his side in the bed. That is the first thing that registers—they are not on Hannibal's godforsaken mattress. Will has asked him once why he'd not bought himself a bed, on a night when his muscles were particularly strained after a long walk and he regretted ever coming to join him on the floor—and Hannibal said then it was good for his back, then proceeded to kiss Will to get him off topic.

Will supposes this here is why. He's been after sneaking his way into Will's bed all this time—how strange that it was the Other Will who caved in the end.

Last night appears to Will distant, like someone else's memory privately recounted years since. He remembers what the skies looked like, brewing darker and heavier until they were mass more than air. He remembers the first patters of rain on the windowsills while he was raiding the medicine cabinet. What did he take? He took a hot bath, that's for sure, hot enough for his skin to glow red and humid by the time Hannibal came home. He took—paracetamol, he thinks, and magnesium citrate, and the seizure meds they'd had to get him off because he'd reacted poorly. The thunder rattled like a spoon knocking into the side of a bowl, stirring and stirring the skies—and the drugs stirred Will's stomach and then his brain so that it was mush and not matter.

He remembers how the shadows assumed new shapes before his eyes. He didn't turn the lights on. He waited for the shapes to terrify him, but they did not. He was aware, with a conviction strengthened by the heady toxicity of everything he had swallowed, that he was the most terrifying thing in the house.

He remembers calling Hannibal. He remembers how easy it was to slip right back into deception. How easy to heave again and over into the toilet bowl without a trace of shame, how easy to push through the diarrhoea and fever and fear he has given to himself. He needed to get Hannibal back to the house before he got to Randall, so he did. He needed to divert his attention, so he did. He needed to terrify him, to remind him he was at the mercy of fate and circumstance, to put him back in his place, so he selected the perfect weapon: Will's very own body.

He needed to make him think once again of the Other Will, to plant and water the seed in his mind so it may flourish later—and this was the easiest of all, perhaps because it is true.

It was easy to let Hannibal into his bed, too, a meaningless boundary discarded without a moment's hesitation. The Other Will has no need for such things: these insignificant crumbs of control are useful only to the Will who holds no real power.

He slips out of bed. He throws on a fresh shirt and sweats, then layers up two thick sweaters. The day is bright but still new; the whole house sleeps. The storm appears to have raged itself out, but it is too early yet to say for sure, and equally too early to say which Will he has woken up to be.

He pours himself a glass of water from the tap in the kitchen. It is ice cold. He tries the light switch: nothing. He vaguely remembers the power going out yesterday, though if he is to be honest with himself, he might have manufactured the memory: it's hardly a logical leap.

He drains the glass, then another. He is parched. There's an unpleasant tightness in his lower stomach and a sour taste in his mouth. He hopes he hasn't shot his kidneys with this gambit. God knows they were in a state already.

Winston comes to sniff at his hand. Will nearly drops the glass on him when he hears a sudden motion upstairs.

Both their heads shoot up. It takes Will a moment to convince himself the Other Will won't come parading down the stairway.

A lock clicks. Soft footsteps patter on the stairs. Will feels such relief to see Abigail emerging in the corridor, he has to sag against the fridge to stop his legs from buckling under him.

He has forgotten her, too.

He opens his mouth to say something to that end, stops himself, settles in his mind on a half-awkward *hello,* and then he speaks—and what comes out is not at all what he expected.

'Do you want to wash?' he asks. His voice is low and hoarse. 'I can heat some water up. It's a gas stove.'

'No, that's fine. I showered at Hannibal's last night before I came back here—I was just brushing my teeth.' She glances away, flustered. Will gets it: it's odd, somehow, to be talking in a whisper like so, at this ungodly hour in the morning, without Hannibal here to supervise. Perhaps that's why he's not saying what he means to be saying? 'Are you feeling better?'

‘Yeah.’

‘Is that supposed to happen? What happened to you last night?’

‘In a perfect world, not really.’

Abigail’s face pinches. ‘I’m asking if you’re getting worse. What you had—encephalitis, right? It could come back, couldn’t it?’

It could. He knows as much. That is the one part of yesterday’s performance he regrets; it cut a little too close to home.

‘I’m not getting worse,’ he says firmly. ‘It’s just a stomach bug. Don’t let me breathe on you.’

‘Just to let you know, you’re not very convincing.’

‘Okay. Noted.’ He peers out the kitchen window. The world outside glimmers white and new. A fresh slate, a virgin earth. His mouth is moving without his input still. Why can he not say what he wants to say? Why can he not reach his own hands to move them? ‘You want to go outside?’

Abigail shudders. ‘Why? It’s freezing.’

‘Pretty though. I need to let the dogs out anyway.’

The way she looks at him makes it obvious that she’ll go, but only because he is a deranged man who should not be allowed to go out into this weather alone. He doesn’t mind. He’ll play deranged if that’s what she wants; he has the suspicion that one form of deranged or another is what she has come to expect.

They build a snowman. Snow sticks to the threads of Abigail’s mittens when she smooths out the curve of the frosty stomach. Will discards his own so the snow can stick and form easier under the heat of his hands, and finds he can’t feel the bite of cold on exposed skin. His cheeks colour and his palms grow numb, but neither bothers him. Any sensation is distant, half-true only; mistaken for absence as easily as the tip of your own nose that interrupts your field of vision. The cold is there, but it is always there. Why should he pay it any mind?

Abigail’s face takes on colour, too. It is easy to push her into loosening the ties of self-awareness; easy to make her forget to be cautious. Easy to deceive her into safety. It is easy to deceive Hannibal into much the same, once he has risen from bed and glared at them for the time required—easy to have them both exactly where he wants them.

As the day wakes, rises and grows, as it bows again under its own weight, the Other Will clarifies to himself his new set of priorities. He will preserve what he has until he has drunk it dry, until the fantasy fades and fractures, until the dollhouse collapses in on their heads. His body is weakened now with illness and love; he will allow it to remain weak for as long as it pleases him. And then, only then, will he let himself loose again, and break each and every one of Hannibal’s bones between his teeth.

What he has in mind is horridly selfish. Horridly deceptive. Horridly shameful—but isn't that exactly what Hannibal did to him? Did he not play with Will for as long as it pleased him? Did he not refuse him the dignity of an early and obvious betrayal?

Once, at the height of the afternoon, Hannibal's Will tries to force his way out.

The Other Will is standing by the bathroom mirror, hands freshly washed still dripping water, and he meets the eye of his reflection without fear. He watches the struggle on his features with a distant interest, he watches the trails that tears leave on his cheeks, he doubles over with the pain that erupts from his stomach, twisting in on itself—

'Stay put,' he mutters. 'You wanted me here. I'm here.'

Will did not want him. Will wanted him to out, away, he wanted him to *starve*—but now that he has Hannibal watching over him, this blind, naïve, too-obvious Hannibal, now the Other Will is never going to go hungry again. He is never going to want for anything at all, anything except blood.

He straightens. He pats his hands dry, he smiles at his reflection the way he'd never allow himself to smile downstairs where there is a role to play, and he leaves the bathroom, the two tea candles burning still below the empty mirror.

The following morning, death relinquishes its hold on the world. The blank outside is now dark with the trails they'd marked in it; his eyes follow them as he stands on the porch in the jacket he doesn't need, squinting instinctively at the blast of sun reflected off snow crystals. A jay perches on the railing and dips her beak into his morning coffee. She manages a good couple of gulps before he sees.

He considers risking another injury to Will's body and drinking the coffee anyway, but then Hannibal appears from thin air—he walks on tip-toes, he does, and knows all the spots on the floor that creak the loudest—and takes the mug away before the Other Will can make up his own mind.

'Water only before your blood tests, Will.'

'Pretty sure a cup of coffee isn't going to interfere with my white cell count.'

'Are you a doctor?'

He glares in lieu of an answer.

Hannibal is unaffected. 'Then how about we let the doctor decide what is and isn't going to interfere with test results.'

'You know what, you're right. You should have the coffee. You clearly need it more than I do.'

Hannibal has been like this since the storm. The Other Will can't entirely blame him, though naturally he refuses to blame himself either. Patience with anyone else's moods seems like

too much work for the amount of energy he has in him, but he supposes he might as well try for at least the semblance of compassion.

He tugs the mug out of Hannibal's hand. 'Don't drink it. A bird's been in that.'

'A bird?'

'A steller's jay. Black and blue.'

A smile peaks through the tight set of Hannibal's features. The Other Will has to remind himself there is no need to feel threatened: the smile is not for him, it is for a Will he is merely pretending to be, thrashing in horror and shame beneath his ribs.

'Can't have you getting bird flu,' he explains just to keep talking. 'God knows how prissy you'd be then.'

'There'll be time for coffee after. We can stop at a café before I drive Abigail back to Baltimore. Would you like that?'

'Sure.'

Bolstered by Will's openness to this new experience, Hannibal trots away happy.

He isn't so sure about the café—it might be busy and he hates busy—but he's willing to feign confidence. He is going to kill a man today: surely he can survive a crowd.

Randall picks him up from the back of the doctor's office just like they talked about. He is wearing his camo jacket and he doesn't talk to Will until they are ensconced safely in the car—a rented car, just like they talked about—and everything in general is moving forward exactly as he had planned. There is less of that fevered excitement in Randall today: it seems as though where the storm has brought Will power, it has taken some of his away.

He has been to Randall's apartment before, on the night when he killed Sutcliffe. But by the time they got to the apartment, Will was just *Will* again. The claws of the beast unclasped the moment the last breath left Sutcliffe's mouth; he remembers the shivering in his hands as Will tried to scrub the blood off every crevice in his body more than he remembers the flaking paint on the living room ceiling or the bone fragments that strew the surfaces of Randall's cramped kitchen. Today, though—today he comes into Randall's space clear-eyed. The claws are there, he can feel them; but if they are closing around anyone, Will is not it.

'What's the plan?' Randall asks tremulously, fingers tight on the bunched-up fabric of his shirt. 'It will be very hard to take her from the ward in daylight unless you can get her to leave on her own. I was thinking maybe if you—'

'How about a glass of water?' the Other Will butts in. 'Can that be step one of the plan?'

Randall barks a laugh.

'And I need a change of clothes like I told you,' he adds, remembering. 'The smell nestles.'

‘Oh, right. They’re in the bathroom—just through here.’

He changes. His brain feels swollen as he does, his mind a painful static. His hold on identity is slipping again, he is growing confused—he would feel better if he could do this back in the woods, where he is most readily himself. The grey of the walls, the smell of traffic, the clunks and whispers dripping through the vents are too strange, too unpredictable, too civilised.

He tugs on one sock. Hannibal’s Will tugs on the other.

‘This is the worst possible time,’ he whispers. ‘Wait.’

The part of Will’s brain dedicated to patience has been eaten straight through. Fear spikes in him—his hands start trembling.

‘Let me—’

Hannibal’s Will breathes. He can just about feel his hands again—can just about decide when to blink and when to breathe. Oh—but he wants out of here now—

He finds Randall in the kitchen, where he is navigating the minefield of jars, hammers, picks and cartilage to find for Will a clean glass. The bone and screws do not look like they are to become a model for the museum; this seems entirely the kind of project you labour over for months, hoping that one day you might be able to bestow it on another as a gift. A really fucked up gift, meant for a really fucked up person. Thank God it’s been Christmas already.

‘What’s this then?’ Will asks, his voice a tremble. How does he run? How does he escape not just a place and time, but his own body before it turns against him?

Randall’s smile is bashful. ‘Just a—you know. A little project. I had to put it on the back burner for a while because I was so busy with our thing.’

Our thing. A painful twitch runs through Will’s hand. As it curls into a claw, he hides it behind his back. ‘And when we kill her? What do we do then?’

‘We make sure Doctor Lecter rots in jail. That’s the whole plan, Will. Have you forgotten?’

‘No, no, I mean after that,’ Will shakes his head. ‘What are you going to do after that?’

Randall throws him a skittish glance. Water sloshes dangerously in the glass when he brings it up to Will’s lips. Carefully, Will pries it out of Randall’s grip. It tastes different than the water in Wolf Trap; there is a bitter aftertaste to it, coppery like blood.

And when he drinks, he realizes that it matters little if he wins this struggle against the Other, if he maintains control, if he finds a way to wrestle his body from him. The Other is right—to survive Randall, he must kill him. To save Abigail, he must kill him. To decide for himself, he must kill him. And to kill him, he must renounce deciding for himself and he must renounce survival. He must relinquish himself to the beast.

He is so much better at it all, isn’t he, when he allows himself to be possessed?

‘I don’t know what we’re going to do after,’ Randall admits. ‘I haven’t thought. But I won’t —I won’t just walk away if that’s what you’re worried about. If you need my help after this, you know, when he’s gone—’

‘That *is* what I’m worried about.’ Will’s eyes cut to the kitchen counter where Randall’s cleared some space off for a cutting board. The knife and the bread lie atop it in a display of casual messiness that Will hasn’t seen first-hand in many months. ‘You want revenge on Hannibal. What if you decide that what I want for him isn’t enough? What if you want to take something else from him?’

Randle’s face twists in bemusement. ‘Will, you don’t think that I would—’

Will grabs the knife off the counter.

‘Will!’

He doesn’t have to pretend that his hands are shaking. He’s waiting for the drop, for the hand on his shoulder, for the moment everything goes black and he doesn’t have to see or feel anymore. Where is he? Where has he gone—he was just here, he was speaking with Will’s mouth and acting with Will’s hands—

Come, he begs silently. Please come.

‘Don’t come any closer, Randall,’ he whispers. ‘Please.’

And it is then, when Randall does the only thing there is to do after hearing such a plea—when Randall steps in close, yearning so desperately for comfort that he can’t stop himself delivering it onto a man brandishing a knife—it is then that Will understands that the monster he is waiting on will never come. The monster does not need to come because he can never leave: the storm might have passed, but it has left the earth scorched. Will can no longer be fooled by his own deception.

A cold hand settles on his shoulder, nails driving in deep.

If he has ever been possessed at all, then he was possessed by the shimmer of a counterfeit reflection, of Hannibal’s fantasy, Hannibal’s lie—possessed by it every time he was sweet, every time he was compassionate, every time he was wanting.

It’s not the Other, then, really, that thrusts the knife in deep. It’s Will. *This* is Will. Blood ribbons from Randall’s throat as he chokes on the foreign object lodged in between bone; it’s not gone in deep enough to stop his breathing, to puncture the artery, to reach the depths of his deceitful mouth. So, Will pulls it out and tries again.

It is so easy.

And when Randall is lying prone on the floor at Will’s feet, when Will looks around madly trying to identify the best tool for cutting short his torment, for putting out the fear that rages behind his eyes, he tries to speak one more time—despite the knife, despite the raw gushing wound that is the lower half of his face, despite everything that Will has done to him.

‘Shush,’ Will speaks over him. ‘Talking time is over. You should have listened to what I was saying to *you*, Randall. That was our deal.’

There is a hammer on the table. Will considers it—would it be a mercy to strike Randall now?

No. Blood and colour are draining from him, and with them drains away the pain. He’s holding onto it now because he believes that with it he’ll hold onto life. Will allows him that last trace of hope—is it not better to die with hope?—and then he gives him the time to slip and slide into death before he brings the hammer down.

He hears the bones crunch and break under skin.

What would have felt heady a moment ago feels only necessary now. Randall is dead; this is over. As with funeral rituals, anything Will does to him now can only benefit the living.

And the living will want Randall’s heart.

Once he is done, he sets the butchered heart in the fridge and he sets himself in the shower. Blood dribbles down his body, staining the cheap acrylic. Such an enormous thing, over so quickly. Yet the feeling in Will, that’s still there: the tremor deep in his chest, the certainty of who he is, the way he has become it so easily that it must have always been true.

He lifts his head into the spray of water, a smile stretching his cheeks. He is filled to the brim with terror, but also with life. He is a thing of fantasy, but he is killing men and leaving gifts of flesh—he is a fairy tale come true.

He is also alive. He is fearful and fearless. He is naked. He wants to be naked always. He wants to eat. He wants Hannibal to fuck him.

And once he is done with that, he wants to kill him.

He knows now why he pushed back against the idea so vehemently then; he was not the Other Will yet. He could not possibly be the Other, because he lacked the strength for it. He was pretending to be someone he is not, a thing thirsty for attention, a man who cares to be loved—he pushed back because he wasn’t ready to kill Hannibal, and because he knew subconsciously it would not do to have anyone else kill him in turn.

He has broken the bones in Randall’s hands. Don’t touch what isn’t yours.

Will wasn’t ready then. He is ready now.

Chapter End Notes

Since this one is a little shorter, you're getting two chapters again today ;)

The Warden

Chapter Summary

There are very few downsides to being the Other Will.

Chapter Notes

This is the second chapter I've published today. Make sure you've not skipped the previous one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Warden.

How all-encompassing the woods are today, how like a mouth gaping open, how they might never emerge. How luscious the pleasure of acting the plaything, of flashing eyes ever brighter, smiles ever wider, hands ever gentler.

How odd the fear that catches up to him when the truck, his sole route of escape now, his sole link to the world outside, won't start under his hand—it is important after all that he establish a means of escape in case he is found out. He shrugs the fear off like a coat too-long worn. He fixes the car. Hannibal leaves him to it, upset over some petty slight. He has no patience for anyone's moods but his own, but he must learn for the time being to entertain Hannibal's. Still, he doesn't like to be left outside alone. Randall has been dead a day and Will has not seen a sign of him, but you never know: it had taken a while for Will's soul to turn revenant.

The din of the evening sets warmth into his bones. He did not think he could be warm so deeply and so surely. For dinner he is served Randall's heart, seared and displayed beautifully on the bed of escarole lettuce Hannibal has laid for it. Hannibal watches him eat as though the only reason the heart had ever beat was to find its way at last into Will's mouth—like he cannot imagine that Randall's life could have served any purpose but to be transubstantiated in death.

He takes the dogs out and runs with them until his cheeks are red, runs with them into the night like they are his pack of beasts and he their hunter. The prey they stalk cannot be seen and cannot be felled. When he's grown tired, he leans against the side of the house and reads Hannibal's messages on the burner phone. He has never dared write him with so little distance between them; he would never have dared, not when he was enamoured with the fallacy of Will the Untruth, Will the Sick, Will the Man.

How dangerous to dare it now. How pathetic Hannibal's ignorance. A wall only separates them. If Hannibal saw through it, he could end it now: he could snap Will's neck, he could tear out his heart, he could go down fighting.

Instead, Will has him on his knees, emptied of fight and full only of need. He has the Chesapeake Ripper on his knees for him. He has the man who terrified Will into sweaty night terrors and panic attacks on his knees for him. He should never allow him to stand again.

This is a thing he quickly discovers about being the Other: he can so easily become swollen on his self-importance. The power he feels when he comes in Hannibal's mouth; the power he feels when he texts him threats from the burner while tucked into a blanket Hannibal has bought him. Power in Hannibal's conviction that he loves a thing that doesn't exist—power in reminding him of it, fingers slipping from excitement over the keys of the flip phone, spewing offense and contradiction and the seeds of ever-growing doubt, waiting for it to drive Hannibal mad. Will calls it fair play.

Aside from the potential risk of a bloated self-esteem, Will sees absolutely no downsides to being the Other.

'How about a drive?'

Beverly has buttoned open her coat but hasn't taken any further steps toward making herself comfortable. She is set on this plan. It is a poor plan: Will has little interest these days in speaking with people who are not on his knees for him like Hannibal Lecter is. He can only extend his pretence so far.

'I thought you wanted coffee,' he reminds her.

'I want coffee, but I want a drive more. Weather's nice. Come on.'

What on Earth would he leave the house for? There is food in the house and there is warmth; it is the only place in the world Will has confirmed is safe. He has only just gained full access, too—that anyone should try to take that away from him makes Will want to strike.

'I'd have to change.'

'Nah. No people. Just the woods and shit roads. You can wear your sweats all you like.'

She isn't going to be argued out of it, so Will decides to bargain instead. 'You'll tell me about Randall Tier.'

'Didn't Hannibal tell you about Randall Tier?'

'You'll tell me the things Hannibal didn't tell me. And the things the FBI won't tell Hannibal.'

She grins. 'Fine. Just don't tell on me, alright?'

'Alright.'

They take the truck. Will still struggles with maintaining focus on the road, but Beverly keeps her eyes open and attentive without it becoming patronising, and does her best not to spill the thermos of coffee.

‘This is a new pair of pants, Will.’

‘The road is shit.’

‘Your driving is shit. Don’t they check before they give you your license back?’

‘No. Seizure-free’s all I need.’ The car’s wheels dig into the wet earth, spinning fast and useless for a second before forcing their way out and forward. ‘Also, they didn’t give me my license back. That’s not for another six weeks.’

‘Oh, so your driving isn’t just shit, it’s illegal. With an officer of the law in the passenger’s seat no less.’

‘I don’t tell on you, you don’t tell on me.’

Will drives her to a clearing Hannibal and he found last week. It must have been someone’s refuge once: there is a garden bench now overgrown with moss, and the shrubs have been cleared off in a way that looks distinctly intentional. The view is of nothing in particular except the forest, but it is nevertheless a fine view, and the sounds of birds chirping in the greenery make Will feel as though he is further away from the city than a map would suggest.

‘There’s cake in the—thing. Under the—yeah.’

‘Oh right.’ Beverly fishes it out from under the stack of blankets Will has thrown into the back. ‘That looks amazing. What is it?’

‘Honey—egg—something. It took nearly the whole damn day to make, so you better hope it’s good.’

She circles the car to watch him step out. The forest floor is slippery. ‘You made it?’

‘I was—moral support.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

They settle themselves on the bench, laying out the blankets to protect their bones from the chill. The cake is good. The sugar and the coffee warm Will up quickly, and he finds he doesn’t need the coat he’s wrapped firmly around him.

‘This is nice.’ Beverly leans on the bench, eyes drifting toward the open sky above. The drifty shapes of cloud are floating gently against a blue so fresh, it is paint on canvass more than air on sky. ‘We should have brought the dogs.’

‘I don’t drive with the dogs.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m not a great driver. Why risk it.’

He’s startled a laugh out of her. ‘So you’re fine driving *me* off the road, and you’re fine driving your beau off the road, but you draw the line at—what’s the big one’s name? Betty?’

‘Yep. You’re stalling.’

‘Guess I am.’

Will doesn’t much want to hear what she has to say, either. He is feeling rather Pretend Will at the moment, what with the act of vulnerability that Beverly has come to expect, and behaviour has the poor habit of translating into feeling into definition—he doesn’t like to hear of death when he is pretending. It risks knocking the whole performance off balance. But Hannibal and Abigail are both at Quantico today, set to be questioned on the disappearance of a man that Will murdered—he hardly deserves the luxury of ignorance.

‘You probably know the basics. Randall Tier, ex-patient, ex-stalker. Jack thinks he killed Cassie Boyle because he knew Doctor Lecter was assisting on the case and he wanted to impress him. Cassie Boyle was this girl we—’

‘I know. Hannibal said.’

‘Right. We found a piece of her rib in Tier’s kitchen. He was working on what we think is like an animal mask? Kind of? Made out of bone? It’s really cool, actually. Price and Zeller want to finish putting it together.’

‘They should.’ Will swallows against a knot in his throat. ‘You could put it in Jack’s Evil Minds Museum.’

‘Not technically his museum, but sure. Anyway. After Tier killed Cassie Boyle, grief drove her brother to kill Marissa Schur, then Tier got Nick Boyle. No one’s sure why or how, we’re thinking Abigail Hobbs as the motive somehow, but in any case we found a knife at his place that matches the wounds on Boyle’s body.’

‘Did you find anything else?’

‘At his place? No. Mask, knife, rib. A rifle, but it didn’t seem like he used it much.’

‘He has too much respect for animals to go out hunting.’

‘Back to your old tricks, Mr Graham?’

‘Hannibal mentioned that Randall—Tier—that he liked animals.’

‘Well, the FBI stance right now is that he’s fled the country and that he left evidence of his crimes for clout. His passport and phone are missing and there was no cash anywhere in the house. He even snatched the copper coins from the dresser—guy’s counting every cent.’

At the mention of Randall’s phone, Will tenses. He should have grabbed the phone. He tells himself that if it had occurred to Hannibal to go through the backlog, surely he would have

mentioned it to the Other Will at some point—but it is not as hard a proof as he would prefer.

'Will?'

'Huh?'

'You with me?'

'Yeah,' Will clears his throat. The fog eases off a little. 'Yeah. So that's the FBI stance. But you don't agree.'

'I don't—I don't *disagree.*'

'Bullshit.'

Beverly takes another piece of cake. She's worked her way through half before she responds.

'I don't want to stress you out, especially because I might be way off base. There's just something that doesn't feel right.'

'I'm already stressed out.' He watches her face for a moment, silently going over everything she's told him so far. 'It was the coins, wasn't it?'

Beverly's mouth quirks into a smile.

'Yes, fine!' she exclaims. 'The dresser was clean. Like, no reason to look at it closely clean. But everything in that apartment is so old, I thought it was strange it was so polished, so I did look closely. And there were coin-shaped traces of iron staining on the wood. Someone had left a bunch of coins on there for months, then took them off and scrubbed the whole thing with a cleanser. It's not that hard to get rid of iron oxide, but if the wood's porous it's really hard to get it all out—unless you have a real good magnifying glass, you won't notice.'

'Okay,' Will says slowly. 'So he wanted a clean dresser.'

'After leaving the coins on there for months he suddenly has a change of heart?' Beverly holds up a hand. 'I mean, you're right. It's possible. It's just—you know how it's nice to do a big clean before you go away on holiday? Because you know when you get home, you'll be coming back to a clean house? His place was *so clean*, Will. Like—OCD clean. Old furniture, cheap fittings, cables sticking out of light fixtures, paint peeling off the ceiling, but every teaspoon in its place? Coins removed from surfaces? The kitchen and bathroom *sparkled*. I thought I'd walked into a cartoon. Who does that before they go on the run from the police?'

First, Hannibal has the gall to reappropriate Randall's death for his own purposes. Then, he does a shit job staging it as a disappearance when all he needed to do was clean up and stay quiet. Then, he drags Abigail into the mess he has made. And now, he's going to get them all caught because he couldn't get over a few coins left out in plain view. Will is going to kill him.

Right. Of course he is: that is the plan.

‘You think something happened in that apartment that Randall doesn’t want the FBI knowing. Hence the deep clean.’

That’s not all she’s thinking. Will sees it in the tension in her face: she’s thinking that *someone* certainly doesn’t want them knowing *something*. But now that he’s said A, she won’t say B; she rightfully suspects that might be too much for Will to handle.

‘I don’t know, Will. I might be wrong.’

‘You might be right.’

‘It’s just a hunch, and it’s not even like I have a theory. I doubt it’s going to go anywhere unless something new turns up.’

That is exactly the problem. Even if this particular scene wields no more clues, that something new can turn up at any moment. How many more patients has Hannibal tempted into obsession? How many curious enough to follow his call? Randall had to die—there was no other way in that moment for Will to protect Abigail, as much as he wishes it had been otherwise—he *had* to die. What if another like him materializes on their doorstep? What if they have to die, too—and what if they’re just as young as Randall, just as desperate, what if Will can’t find any other way to—

‘Change the subject?’ he asks softly.

‘I’m thinking of going somewhere nice and touristy for a week,’ Beverly supplies without delay. ‘Disappear into the crowd, take pictures of something other than dead people for once. Get myself one of those selfie sticks. This one guy we caught used a selfie stick to bludgeon someone to death—you get a good model, it can be a surprisingly sturdy thing.’

‘Sounds nice.’

‘What about you? You got any summer getaways planned? A mansion in Europe? A haunted castle?’

Will doesn’t really care for talking about the future. Summer looms on the horizon; after summer autumn, and then winter and next year and the year after that. What could they possibly hold but threat? There might be another Randall in this future. Hannibal might start asking too much of Will. The fury stoked in his stomach might ask too much of Will. The FBI might come knocking, or Hannibal might find the knife Will’s hidden in the tear of their mattress all those months ago, or Will might get ill again.

He might get ill again. And if he does, Others and fires and knives will all fade away—in illness, it is the real that becomes the illusion.

Beverly’s picked up on his unease. She is about to say something to that end; Will would rather not hear it. ‘I’m thinking of starting a garden,’ he prevents her.

‘A garden?’

Will shrugs. ‘Something to do. Can’t spend the rest of my life on the couch, can I?’

‘You don’t have a couch.’

‘Good thing, too. There’d be nothing to stop me then.’

Beverly turns to face him. ‘You know that’s ridiculous, don’t you? Your body’s messed up. Your brain is messed up. You’re barely alive—’

‘Thanks.’

‘—and you go from monosyllables to schooling me on suspect profiles in, what, four months? Not to mention managing seven dogs and the demands of a lover on top of that—’

‘God,’ Will laughs, ‘don’t call him that.’

‘How are you not exhausted? You must be exhausted. You deserve not to do a single thing more for the rest of your life. You’ve done plenty. Get that?’

Will stares at his shoes. He takes note of every speck on the leather. ‘Got it,’ he says quietly.

‘Good.’ Beverly’s shoulders relax again. She sits back, pushing her feet out as far as they will go. ‘So, garden. Sounds good. Can you plant cilantro? It’s always a bother to find fresh and Zeller thinks it tastes like soap. It’s the only way to stop him stealing my lunches.’

‘Cilantro. Noted.’

‘Look at that. There’s already some actual colour in you. You should get out more.’

‘I get out.’

‘Without your bodyguard? Come on.’

It’s true that he feels more energized when he is away from the house; it must be the inherent danger of it. Clearly, this feeling of threat is such an essential component of who he is that he fades and withers without it. On the other hand, both times that Will has ventured out on his own he mauled a man to death, which seems pertinent to the discussion.

Since Hannibal said he won’t be back for lunch—he is too busy brainwashing teenage girls to make it—Beverly offers to get Will groceries before she drives back home. Someone must make up for the fact the master of the house isn’t here to fill Will’s bowl.

That is a thought that certainly doesn’t belong to Hannibal’s Will, only to the Other—Will shoves it away once, then again, until it’s hidden from sight and he is ready for Hannibal to return and lay eyes on him again.

Hannibal sees a lot: Will must exercise caution. He sees that Will’s performance is slipping, that he is failing to be the thing he has promised to be. The more Will allows himself to be the *Other*—to be *himself*—the more difficult it is to squeeze into this form moulded for him, the more difficult it is to spare it the sustenance it needs to survive. He is slipping. Hannibal sees this.

He sees Will in the kitchen when he returns, he sees the circles under his eyes, he sees the weariness in his shoulders. He sees the way Will's hands tremble minutely as he sets out the groceries. Will fears he might see, too, the feeling quickened, rapid—spilling in him—when he sees Hannibal dump the whole of the store-bought bread in the trash—*plastic bread,* he calls it, and he's already ransacking the kitchen to make Will something he does not consider beneath him—does he see the way Will cannot swallow around how stupidly adorable he finds this fussiness, how tight-clenching this sweetness, how much he wants to beat him to death for some relief?

But Hannibal doesn't see any of that. That is not a fairy tale and it is not a dream. It is entirely, unflinchingly real, and real things evade Hannibal's astute perception.

We are quite alike in one regard.

Will lifts himself from the half-slumber, feeling around the hazy world that reveals itself before his slow-blinking eyes. The sweater he's wearing—red, Christmas gift from Hannibal—scratches at his cheek. He hitches the blanket up to better ensconce him. He rarely wants to be without the blanket.

What day is it today? It's a morning. Hannibal's off on a walk with the dogs; Will is in bed. It could be any day. Will would swear yesterday he was standing in the kitchen, unpacking the groceries Beverly had brought and telling Hannibal he didn't want to talk about Randall Tier anymore, but it wasn't yesterday. Beads on a string, these empty days of safety. After the first few, you lose track.

The burner phone is clasped in his hand, flashing its message. Will gets the burner from the upstairs bedroom the moment Hannibal steps out of the house. He must have fallen asleep waiting.

What regard, he replies, slower for how thick and cold his fingers feel.

You killed Donald and Randall because they deserved to die. In killing, you bestow judgement.

Randall's final attempt at speech flashes before Will's eyes. The terror on Donald Sutcliffe's face, the warmth of him between Will's thighs. *I don't think you can compare killing someone because they destroyed a man's life,* he writes back, *and killing someone because they didn't like your shoes*

No matter how hard we try, judgement is always subjective.

Will snorts.

That's not why I killed them anyway

He blinks at his own message.

He doesn't need to hear Hannibal's voice to know he doesn't believe him. *Why did you kill them?*

Maybe they did deserve it, Will replies slowly, sorting through the threads of this new knowledge he's woken into. *But I killed them because there was no other way. I killed them because they had to die*

His thumb hovers reluctant over the send button. He isn't sure he wants to admit this to Hannibal.

He sends it.

Almost immediately, Hannibal's disappointment brightens the screen. *You surprise me, Will. I did not take you for a beast who shuns responsibility.*

Well, fuck you, Will thinks.

I'm not shunning anything. *They had to die because I could not find another way out. That's on me. That's my responsibility*

He closes his eyes loosely. A single step, a minute shift, and he is where he needs to be: back in the woods where he belongs, watching a boy flay a man open in his desperation. This complete lack of control, this animal instinct that Hannibal so hails—it both enamours and terrifies him, Will knows, the one boundary he cannot allow himself to cross or he will be made a child again.

That hunter you killed in the woods, he reminds him gleefully, *on the night he found you in blood red snow with another's guts staining your hands. The man who saw what you did and saw who you were*

Hannibal doesn't respond immediately. Good. Will doesn't need his input here. The memory of this moment has been burnt into Will's brain; he recognizes it as one of his false memories, as something that's trickled in through the unbound stream of empathy and imagination, and still it does feel as though he'd been there to see it happen.

You didn't kill him because he deserved it. He'd done nothing to deserve it, not even in your eyes. You killed him because he had to die. Because you could find no other way out

Nothing. Will grins, high on cruelty.

It feels different, doesn't it? Killing someone because in that moment that seems like your only choice?

Hannibal makes him wait after this one. A poor attempt at retribution. Will pushes off the blanket. He's warm enough now.

I wouldn't know, he finally says. *I have not done it enough to run a comprehensive study. Does it?*

Will grins. *Wouldn't want to interfere with future results*

I have no interest in running such a study. I imagine you know as much

I had no interest in killing Randall, Will points out, too fast, too sincere. *Yet here we are*

Hannibal doesn't like that either. *I must be getting back to Will,* he replies curtly. He knows full well it is the ultimate offense.

Will lets the phone drop to the floor. Somehow it is more satisfying than it would have been to throw it across the room. Throwing requires energy, it suggests a robustness of emotion; in its off-handedness, this is more insulting.

Too bad Hannibal isn't here to see it.

Before Hannibal's return, Will gets himself a snack from the kitchen. He eats the nuts out of his hand, blanket thrown over his shoulders. With every nut, he reminds himself of an important thing: he knows nothing. He wants for nothing. He is warm to the touch.

By the time the cashews and walnuts are gone all, he has nudged himself roughly into the shape required. When Hannibal returns, he sees that something is wrong but does not see what—and looks on concerned when he finds Will's cheek cold under his lips. He gets him the heavy coat to wear even though it is now fully spring.

They have an excursion ahead of them today. He imagines the Will he has once pretended to be might feel all sorts of anxious about it; he imagines that he himself feels only a sort of amused anticipation at the thought of the charade.

Doctor Bedelia Du Maurier apparently doesn't have an office, so they drive to her house. Hannibal takes his turns a little too confidently, indicating to Will he has visited before. It makes sense, of course: he is her patient. But could he not have found himself a therapist who'd see him somewhere *else* than her own house? Is that too much to ask?

'Is that the house?'

'It is.'

'God.'

Hannibal's lips quirk up. 'I gather you don't like it.'

'It's offensive.'

'Offensive to who, Will?'

'Me.'

Hannibal ignores him. He is busy pretending the act of parking demands his full attention.

'We're in the sun,' Will is satisfied to point out. 'Car's going to get hot as all hell.'

'Do you see any shade around, Will?'

‘Could just park in that nightmare of a garage. What, she got a fire engine in there? Who needs a garage that can fit five cars?’

Hannibal’s eyes cut to the building in question. ‘An over-exaggeration,’ he decides. ‘But you’re right: it is a shame to let all that space go to waste.’

If he thinks he’s being subtle, he should think again. He’s been angling to make some changes to the upstairs of the house for weeks. ‘Maybe she needs it for her five cars,’ Will jibes.

‘I am fairly certain Doctor du Maurier has only the one.’

And how would you know that, Will wants to ask, only that would definitely fall short of subtle and he refuses to stoop to Hannibal’s level.

Officially, Will is here so he can be told he is depressed by an expert he’s not also fucking. Unofficially, he is here to be interviewed with regards to any buttons on him that might have gone unpushed. There is a way, surely, to twist this whole thing to Will’s advantage—that is precisely why he has agreed to come in the first place—but he struggles to think of how once the door has locked behind Hannibal’s retreating form. Will watches him through the window for a moment, too forlorn to bother hiding it. Let Doctor du Maurier report on that. It’s not as though Hannibal doesn’t already know Will is a sorry bundle of co-dependency.

She invites Will to take a seat in the lounge. The chairs are leather. The air smells of freshly applied perfume. She would have been getting ready for their arrival, adjusting scents and jewellery, edging into place the delicate golden watch that will have warned her of their approach. What does she expect from him? Expectation stains the air, too, but then some of that might be Will’s own—he is sitting in the chair Hannibal would have been sitting in, he is placing his hands over where Hannibal would have placed them. This room here holds the memory of things Hannibal has never told Will, and they are all for the taking now that in his recklessness Hannibal has allowed Will to invade this space. What a stupid thing to have done.

‘Why don’t you tell me what brings you here today, Will.’

‘I think you mean *who.*’ Will gazes around the room. ‘Big house you got. That’s a two-vehicle garage outside, too. Maybe three. You a car enthusiast?’

Doctor Du Maurier won’t be diverted quite so easily. ‘The garage came with the house. How are you feeling today?’ she asks again, voice smooth and dead as silk.

‘Tired.’

‘Are you often tired?’

It is easier to meet the gaze of a man dying at your feet than it is to meet hers—or perhaps Will hasn’t had as much practice with the living. The peculiar shyness he feels doesn’t, at least, translate into his voice.

‘I’m sure the, uh, the malfunctioning chemistry of my brain is a fascinating topic, but it is fascinating to a professional. Less so a layman. Feel free to give my neurologist a call if you like.’

Doctor Du Maurier inclines her head. ‘You are hardly a layman. Hannibal tells me you hold a degree in forensic science and that you specialized in criminal psychology.’

‘Thank God I’ve forgotten it all.’

‘I doubt that’s entirely true. Skills are less easily lost than memories, even if the time we acquired them is forgotten.’

‘They had to teach me how to wipe my own ass again. I think I might have lost some of my academics alongside that.’

Doctor Du Maurier doesn’t wince, but she grows too still as she holds in the reaction. Will frowns, surprised.

‘Really?’ he asks, suspecting deceit. ‘That’s got to be the cheapest trick in the world, playing gross out the therapist. I didn’t even put my heart in it—and you’re still affected?’

She blinks once, then admits, ‘You’re different than I expected.’

Now they’re getting somewhere. ‘Different than what Hannibal told you. But that’s not—that’s not surprising to you, is it?’

‘No. I did suspect he was blinkered.’

‘Is he often blinkered?’

She shakes her head, just enough to get her meaning across: she refuses to take her eyes off him. Will wonders if she’s doing it because she knows it makes him uncomfortable, but that sounds distinctly more Hannibal’s style.

‘Hannibal is skilled in observation,’ she says. ‘It would seem that so are you.’

‘Hm.’ Will isn’t keen on committing himself on either point. ‘He’s not the type to play gross out the therapist either. I wonder what he resorts to when he wants to shock you.’

‘This isn’t Hannibal’s therapy session, Will. It’s yours.’

‘Right. It’s mine. So—remind me, how does this work? What do we talk about?’ Before she can do more than open her mouth to answer, Will does it for her. ‘Wait—we can talk about whatever I want to talk about. I know that one. Alright. I want to talk about Hannibal.’

He meets her eyes on that one. He regrets it almost immediately.

‘Very well,’ she says, refusing him the satisfaction of irking her. ‘Let’s talk about Hannibal.’

She's succeeded in tripping him out of step. The silence stretches. There is very little Will has to say about Hannibal that can be said out loud.

'Why are you here, Will?' Her voice has no trace of reproach in it. Worse, Will hears a tinge of pity. 'Do you wish me to tell you Hannibal Lecter's secrets, or do you wish only to reassure yourself that the sum of them is less than what he admits to you within a single breath?'

Will fights the rise of colour to his cheeks. 'I'm not here to be reassured.'

'No? Then what is it you expect me to tell you?'

He huffs a laugh, ugly and pitifully defensive. 'I don't expect you'll tell me anything. You can't. I just can't decide if that's because you're actually deaf and blind, or because you're covering your ears every time your precious patient speaks, and your eyes every time he tries to meet them.'

Now, at least, they are on even ground. Will cannot bring herself to look at her again, but neither can Bedelia du Maurier force her cold gaze back to his face.

'My responsibility is to help Hannibal to the extent that I am able. I do not aspire to any role beyond that which is customary to my profession.'

It is a wilful ignorance, then. Will is beginning to wonder whether that might be the only kind out there. It is an ignorance that equals tacit compliance, that tips oh-so-easily into participation—Doctor Sutcliffe signing off on a manufactured brain scan, smiling his vacant smile at Will, helping him into the car. Doctor du Maurier sitting here today, listening, knowing she'll be interrogated by Hannibal after.

And Will, sitting in their home, tucking into the feasts Hannibal makes for him, bidding his time. Pretending he is not strong enough to refuse another bite.

'You tell yourself you know nothing,' he says, sounding cold and feeling colder. 'You tell yourself you are powerless in either case. Because if you know nothing and you can help nothing, then of course you're well within your rights to *do* nothing—none of it is your fault.'

'My profession is built upon a respect for boundaries. My duty of care only extends so far—'

'Bullshit,' Will snaps. He wants to bite something, he wants to sink his teeth in and shred it to pieces. 'Really? That's the bullshit that lets you keep a clear conscience? I'm not buying what you're selling, *Bedelia*.'

She is silent for a fraction too long, her head turned to the side more sharply than seems natural. These are her only tells, but they are enough—Will knows he has struck where it hurts.

'Perhaps there are things more pressing and more vital to me than a clear conscience,' she speaks roughly. 'Morality is a construct essential to any functioning society—but there are things more primal and more powerful, if only because they predate societies.'

‘The reptile brain trumps the instinct to maintain social order?’ Will asks drily. ‘That one always holds up in court.’

Bedelia pretends not to hear him. ‘The instinct to survive is one such thing, of course. Then the instincts to feed, to drink, to live.’

‘That’s your game? Any time you want to rationalize selfishness, you pick another trump card to play?’

Her lips twitch. He doesn’t realize he’s caught until the hook is driven deep.

‘It seems to me you are proficient at the game as well,’ she points out gently, though certainly not kindly. ‘The only direct action you have taken so far is come to me to broadcast your bitterness.’

That is not true: Will has done more than that. He has gone to Randall Tier and asked him to help rid the Earth of the spreading fever that is Hannibal Lecter left unchecked—and then he has eaten Randall Tier’s heart out of Hannibal’s hand.

‘You have every right to prioritize survival,’ Bedelia adds after a beat of silence. ‘You have my full support to continue doing just that.’

Will snorts. ‘Thanks. What’s he got on you, anyway? He’s got to have something besides vague threat—that gets old.’

Bedelia doesn’t seem to believe it gets old at all, but she doesn’t try and pretend Will doesn’t have a point. This resolves into silence.

‘Fine, don’t tell me. Not like it matters much—I was just curious.’

She considers him. The intensity of the searching gaze is enough to draw a blush to Will’s face again; he is glad he thought to wear his glasses for this.

‘If I were to trust Hannibal’s judgement, I would have expected to find you blissfully unaware of the danger you are living in,’ Bedelia says at last. ‘As I’ve said, I did not trust it. I expected instead to see fear. But you are not afraid.’

No. Will wishes he could be afraid. Fear is a motivator; more and more, the most he can get himself to feel within the span of a day is resignation.

‘I do not think you are motivated by survival at all,’ Bedelia muses. ‘Though you most likely should be.’

‘Most likely.’

‘What is your trump card, Will, if not survival? Is it hunger? Thirst?’

‘The instinct to breed?’ Will snipes, though it lacks conviction.

The fact that she even has to ask reveals to Will this simple truth: for all her insight, Bedelia du Maurier does not understand, not in the way he does, not with blood and breath—she doesn't understand that it is a little bit hunger, a little bit thirst, a little bit survival. But in the end, Will can eat and he can drink and he can make it 'till old age just fine with Hannibal rotting under his floorboards. The real trump card is *life*—the full, unrestrained swell of it, like sun in summer and the melting of the last of snow.

She doesn't understand. Will is alone in this.

'Restroom?' he manages, desolation tightened into a knot around his lungs.

That gives her pleasure for sure. 'Down the hall, to the right.'

He stumbles into the narrow room and leans against the door. He keeps his gaze down in case it snags accidentally on the mirror above the sink—the last thing he needs right now is the awful sight of eyes perfectly blue and clear.

He feels—distinctly not himself. Distinctly like someone he is not.

With the shaking hands that are not really his, Will searches through his pockets—to this day, the skill of remembering where he's put what continues to elude the *fascinating* chemistry of his brain—and digs out the burner, secured in the inner lining of his jacket.

The third person you killed, he types in. Hits send.

The prompt arrival of Hannibal's reply is like a balm soothing a burn.

An exploration of my new independence. I was nineteen and living on my own for the first time in my life. I told time by the full moons and savoured my first taste of the loneliness of adulthood.

Will shuts his eyes loosely, drawing a sharp-cheeked boy onto the canvass of a tepid night, bright with the glare of the wide moon. *Depressed teen with no friends in the city kills a man for the drama of it,* he wheedles.

Prosaic but accurate. Oh, but he's pissed. It doesn't take much when you know how to go about it.

Did it feel different to the others? Will asks.

Hannibal appears to mull this over. *Yes,* he decides. *It felt better.*

Because you were in control

Yes.

Will can only imagine what that must feel like, to stand before a body you've put there and feel in control of your hands and your teeth. That has distinctly *not* been his experience.

Then again, his hands are no longer shaking and they feel like Will's own hands again. The feeling of control is perhaps not so alien after all, even if it lies within an alien context. It might be illusion or it might be a lie, but he does feel in control: now.

He slides the burner back into his jacket. He clicks the lock free and pushes the door open.

Bedelia is waiting for him in the lounge, visible through the open doorway. Will advances on it, but stops short of crossing the threshold, afraid that his reacquired confidence might evaporate the moment he leaves the liminality of the hallway.

He leans against the doorjamb, daring himself to hold her gaze over the armchair he refuses to occupy.

'Our time will be up soon,' she informs neutrally. 'Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?'

Will shakes his head. 'I think we've both heard enough. Although—maybe just this.'

Bedelia hums fake interest. She is tired of him. Hardly a surprise.

'Survival trumps the moral decrepitude of keeping mum,' Will says, plucking each word carefully and setting them one after the other in painstaking order. 'That's one powerful card you're holding.'

She inclines her head. Will copies the motion like a mirror reflection.

'I invite you to—to consider—that I may be all out of cards, but I *am* holding the keys to the beast's cage.'

Their eyes meet. Will smiles.

'I'd take my chances crossing the beast on the other side of the bars,' he says, 'before I *dared* cross the warden.'

Chapter End Notes

Will was so much fun to write in this one. I hope you enjoyed him, too.
As always, thank you for reading.

The Faerie King

Chapter Summary

> When his dreams turn disturbing, Will must reconsider what it is that the darkness in him wants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Faerie King.

A table rises in the middle of the room, damp and gone liquid at the edges. This is not how Will remembers the basement. What has happened to it in his absence? How long has it been?

He turns to Hannibal, who is pulling on white surgical gloves with practiced off-handedness. ‘Look at the state of the place,’ Will says, voice rising upward at the final word in mimicry of a question he does not know how to phrase. He doesn’t want Hannibal to know that he’s been losing the plot again, that in disaffection his hold on time is slipping. He doesn’t want to worry him.

Hannibal gazes around as though he does not understand what Will is talking about. His eyes glaze over the black mould branched onto the ceiling, over the floor tiles dipping into the stream of black that rushes down into the void. He can’t see any of it.

‘Up on the table then,’ he orders, ignoring the comment as a display of whimsy.

Will hefts himself onto the metal, cold beneath his bare thighs.

Cradling Will’s head in his hand, Hannibal helps lower him to lie on his back, shushing through the hiss that the shock of cold produces in Will’s heated body. The pink of his skin, Will thinks as he examines his outstretched arms in quiet wonder, will soon bleed into the cool metal and feed it until that is made warm instead. Until Will is as white as porcelain.

‘Arms at your sides, please.’ Hannibal tugs at Will’s wrist, tone as gently patient as though he is addressing an easily distracted child. ‘Stay still.’

Will nods. He drops his hands and focuses on the tools adorning the walls: the knives, the bone saws, the mallets and spreaders and scalpels and rope. Anything to keep him from thinking too much of how Hannibal’s hands feel on his bare flesh, because then he is sure to move—and that is not the point of the exercise.

What is the point of the exercise?

‘A little remodel,’ Hannibal explains, as though he can hear the question through Will’s skull. ‘Nothing too drastic.’

‘Okay,’ says Will. ‘Whatever you want.’

A smile dances in Hannibal’s eyes. ‘Thank you, Will.’

He cuts.

The first touch of scalpel is cold and it is nothing. The second, as blood wells around the faint line of intrusion, is an explosion of agony. Will grabs at the sides of the surgical table, forces himself back and into the unforgiving metal, trying and failing to stay still as Hannibal requested—his legs kick out, his toes curl, his head cranes back and reveals to Hannibal the panicked swell of throat.

‘Will,’ comes the chastisement.

‘Sorry,’ Will whispers. ‘I can’t—’

‘You can.’

He can. He is perfectly able to. He tenses, he aches, he drinks the pain in ‘till he is drunken on it, but he lets Hannibal cut all the way down his stomach, to break the ribs and splice through gut, to pull out organ after organ and rearrange them again to his liking. His lung goes where his kidney used to be. His liver is dissected and placed softly where lung used to sit. His hair is swept back from his forehead to make room, and Hannibal fishes his brain matter out of his skull, fistful by fistful, blood and fluid dripping over Will’s face, catching on his lashes as he blinks furiously to clear his vision.

As he has always been, Will is perfectly able to let him.

The heart is the last of it. Hannibal sets this aside as he sews Will back up, with hair-thin stitches woven from air itself, invisible to anyone’s eye but his own. Will’s fingers itch to reach out and grab one, but Hannibal would not be happy with him then.

‘All done,’ Hannibal announces. ‘Would you like a taste?’

He proffers the heart as though it is a sweet bun, glazed and sprinkled with cinnamon. It beats steadily in his hand, a stark contrast to the terror Will feels coursing through him.

He imagines what it might taste like going down. Just a bite, maybe.

‘No.’ He swallows, looking up to meet Hannibal’s gaze. ‘No. Eat it whole.’

Immediately, he knows he has given the right answer. Hannibal does not smile and his face does not light up; but when it drops, it plunges into such dark, such deep, such hopeless satisfaction that Will feels pulled forward, off the table, into its gravity.

Hannibal opens his mouth. His teeth glimmer white as pearls.

Will wakes bathed in cold sweat, face sticky and awful with tears.

The sun has risen enough now to peek out from the treeline and blast through the windows, bathing Will's bed a cool golden. The blanket lies bunched up at his knees, knotted oddly around feet that have grown too hot in their socks. If the nightmare hadn't woken him, the sun alone might have done. The day is not made for sleeping. He misses, suddenly, the winter: when night and day appear alike, when soft things and hot drinks are required to shield yourself from the death that waits outside. What's waiting outside now? What reason could he quote when asked why he refuses to leave?

And now he's taken to dreaming the dreams of a Will he no longer is. He had dreamt of nothing at all since Randall's death—nothing at all until he began dreaming of helplessness.

The other night, after Hannibal told him about Franklyn's suspicions around Tobias Budge, Will decided it was as good a time as any for a little experiment. If asked, he could quote to Hannibal the conversation and spew nonsense about the visions of a murder encroaching upon his emotional stability—robbing him of self-awareness, depriving him of self-control—

Hannibal never asked.

That night, Hannibal removed Will's clothes for him, peeled off his socks, separated what could be worn again and what had to go in the laundry basket, precisely as requested. He helped Will into the bath like no time had passed. Will sank into the old helplessness he had once so despaired: into an inability to struggle with limbs too weak to protest, into the futility of arguing with words that never matched their meaning. A lost dream realized: he played the part for himself that evening and not for Hannibal, he imagined that he accepted the duplicitous care because he again had no other recourse. He imagined that Hannibal was his sole and final recourse in all the world.

Like in every dream he has had lately, there was an edge of horror to the experience. But it was made blunt by pretence, by the numb that had settled into Will, by never being able to reach again who he'd once been and what he had once wanted.

What would have happened if he had revealed himself then, he wonders? If, lying in the tub with his head secured in Hannibal's broad palm, he had told him he had killed Randall, had killed Sutcliffe, had taunted him for months? That he'd only ever played at wanting everything he'd been given, that he'd been plotting concurrently a reckoning for slights Hannibal had thought would fade into forget?

Would he have believed him?

Would he have persevered in his delusion and attempted to talk Will out of himself?

Would he have claimed victory, would he have determined that through the magic of warm regard and the right conditioner he had indeed healed the split? Would he have recoiled back? Would he have drowned him?

Or—or, having learned that the monster was real and that his needy, brittle, godawful childish fantasy was not, would he have preferred the monster?

He watched Hannibal after: kneeling on the tile, massaging lotion into Will's feet, fingers dancing over the place on the ankle that always makes Will wriggle and squirm. He watched the way his hair fell over his forehead as he craned his neck to examine some imperfection, a new mole or a cracked heel or an ingrown hair appeared on Will's big toe. The hair shielded his expression from Will's eyes. He'd be going to get it dyed again soon: threads of silver ran through it, near the scalp, faint and visible only upon close inspection. They looked like the silver thread Hannibal used in the dream to sew Will up whole.

Will tried to picture the man at his feet rotting under the floorboards. It was not difficult.

But he could not imagine *himself.*

He went over every scenario, every fantasy, and though he saw death and victory and failure, though he saw blood and punches and teeth, Will felt absent. There was a man there who looked like Will, maybe a little shorter, maybe with hair that curled a little different, maybe his stance wasn't quite Will's stance and maybe his eyes were dark and bottomless—but Will was looking in on it, always, a silent observer that faded more and more with every blow they dealt one another.

And every time since, whenever he has Hannibal tend to him or feed him, whenever he wakes in the middle of the night to feel Hannibal's breath on his cheek, there comes a time his imaginings are cut short by a flush of heat and horror. Because it occurs to Will then that he might have been duped.

He'd been looking for Will Graham and convinced himself he found him in the woods, but is that not the way of the faerie, to cloak their bodies in what you desire most and only reveal themselves once they have had their share of flesh? He *wished,* oh, he wished so desperately to be vicious, to be a beast without conscience or pity, to be driven by bloodlust, driven by revenge, driven by the inevitability of the pain that had been inflicted upon him.

But you do not get what you wish for just by wishing it.

So what if this Will—oh God—what if this Will sitting on the wicker chair in his bathroom that night, loose-limbed from the attentions of a man who has destroyed his life, the Will who woke from nightmares of perversion and gentleness, this Will who—what if this was all that Will had, in the end, the sum of who he was if did not wish to be? What if the things he felt and the things he made felt were real, what if he had found Will Graham—what if this is what he stood to lose?

It makes such tremendous sense because Will can never do what is easiest. And meeting Hannibal's gaze then as he asked him whether there was anything he could do, mirroring the sad lilt of his mouth, inhaling the desperation that had settled in his breath, knowing what he knows is coming—

It was not easy.

'Will. Are you awake?'

He lifts himself on his elbows to see. Hannibal has returned from the market with another shitload of eggs. He's wearing, Will realizes with a jolt of dread, the exact outfit he wore in his dream; only he smells not of disinfectant but of parsley and dill.

'More eggs?' he asks in lieu of confirmation. 'Haven't we made a dozen cakes by now?'

'These are for painting.' His tone is too light. Will's eyes narrow suspiciously.

'I'm not painting eggs. I could not care less about Easter, Hannibal.'

'They're painting eggs in group therapy on Monday.'

'Good for them—oh. Either I paint eggs with you or I paint eggs with the other mental cases. You sure you want to run that gamble?'

'I think I will risk it.'

It's a pretty safe gamble. Will has never celebrated Easter, but he will celebrate whatever Hannibal wants, even if it's an excuse only for occupational therapy—that's what Hannibal's Will would do, after all.

'You're getting out of bed, I see. Is that to call your friends from group and tell them you're coming?'

'Don't be an asshole.'

He staggers a little when his feet meet the floor, legs gone numb from the rest and from the dream. Hannibal abandons his produce to catch him under the armpit and take some weight off—it helps still the whirl that is the floor.

'We'll do the garden first, I think.'

'What?'

'We were going to clear the grass for fertilizer. We spoke about it this morning, Will.'

Will does vaguely recall a conversation to that end. 'I'm pretty sure I didn't agree to that.'

'You said you wouldn't do it because you were going to spend all day in bed. But since you've got out of bed already—'

'Very clever.'

The garden work is a prosperity of suffering. The sun beats down on Will, drawing an itch into his fast-reddening neck. The grass has roots that run deep and wide. They tear in his hands, leaving bits and pieces behind that must be pried out through the awkward gloves. Will's back and arms start aching only ten minutes in, and his knees he is sure will never recover.

It is also good occupational therapy.

‘Penny for your thoughts, Will?’

There’s a knowing smirk on Hannibal’s face. Will is going to have to come up with something to think of quickly, lest he acknowledge that gardening does in fact help soothe the mind.

‘That’s less than market value.’

‘Is it? My apologies. How much then?’

‘Wipe that self-satisfaction off your face for starters.’

That is one impossible task, but to Hannibal’s credit he does at least try to school his features. To anyone else, he might appear humble.

‘Is that satisfactory?’

‘It’s a bad effort, but it’s an effort. And I’ve been thinking of faeries.’

Hannibal looks up from his plot of land, nearly all dark now and bare. ‘Faeries?’

‘Faeries. I wonder if that’s where you got your Other Will from. The story you used to tell me followed some of the same themes.’

Hannibal doesn’t protest the use of the possessive: *your* Other Will. That makes Will’s hackles rise, as much as he tries to hide it—the Other Will is certainly not Hannibal’s. That is the one sure thing about him.

‘I suppose the idea of striking deals is common to many stories of the fey,’ Hannibal muses. He sounds entirely as though they’re holding a book club. He sounds entirely like a man who hasn’t been texting filth to a figment of his imagination for weeks. ‘And to my knowledge faeries are often perceived as akin to spirits of the dead, especially those who have passed away with unfinished business.’

‘What is this one’s unfinished business, then? You never told me that.’

Hannibal smiles a private smile. ‘I am not sure he knows himself. Are monsters from the past back on your mind, Will? It’s been a while since you last guarded our leftovers from porch thieves.’

Will’s gardening gloves are holding pools of sweat. He peels them off. ‘I don’t think anymore that an empty porch is going to stop him.’

Hannibal’s eyebrow rises.

‘I know he’s not real,’ Will explains quickly. It is the truth, more or less: he has grown an understanding toward the liminal and though he may well be a mental case, he is at least aware of being a mental case. ‘He’s your story and he’s my delusion. But he came from somewhere. He served a purpose. A symbol, maybe, an allegory—he was the repressed in Will Graham, wasn’t he? That’s how you got the idea. Before you got fairies into it.’

‘I—’ Hannibal hesitates. ‘I suppose so. Jung’s shadow self: the desires we keep to the darkest parts of our minds because to accept them would change fundamentally who we are, and that terrifies us.’

‘But we secretly want it. We’re doomed to be driven by what we refuse to accept.’

‘Yes.’

‘So, what drives him? He already is his darkest drives. What does the repressed repress?’

Hannibal leaves the grass be. He tilts his head back as he considers, eyes narrowing against the onslaught of the sun. Will hopes there is an answer he can give him. He hopes perhaps Hannibal can see, that he can tell, something about Will that Will cannot yet grasp.

Maybe if he gave the Other what he didn’t know he wanted, the Other might release him.

‘I’m not sure, Will. Perhaps he is secretly driven by the things that you actively want.’

Will’s brows furrow. ‘I don’t know what I want.’

Something wet tickles at his wrist, where some of the wet earth has smudged its mark. He peers down to see Zoe’s snout, inquisitive and insistent.

‘*She* knows what she wants,’ he notes as he offers his palms up for sniffing. The thick scent of earth and wet makes her sneeze.

Hannibal chuckles. The mood is broken.

Zoe gives Will’s thumb an experimental lick, then peers up with eyes full of disappointment.

‘Not very good, is it?’

Across the lawn of overturned ground that is to one day become their garden, Hannibal is already palming at his pockets in search of a treat.

‘At least make her sit,’ Will sighs. He has the vague memory of Zoe once being a well-trained dog.

Zoe sits for the split of a second, then leaps to try and force her snout into Hannibal’s fisted hand, for which she is promptly rewarded with treats and praise. Hannibal spoils all the dogs, but the rest are old enough not to be remoulded so easily. Will has accepted Zoe as a lost cause.

‘It is important to pursue what we desire,’ Hannibal explains when he catches Will’s expression. ‘To ask for what we want and take it for ourselves if necessary.’

‘You should rebrand your practice. Plenty dogs out there with a crisis of self-confidence that would love this pep talk.’

‘I’m sure they would.’

‘I think this is done anyway.’

‘There is still some grass here.’

Will’s knees protest when he lifts himself up. His thighs burn with how long he’s had them folded underneath him.

He lowers himself again next to Hannibal, hand planted on his shoulder to help steady him. He searches the dark earth for any trace of thready white.

‘There’s nothing here, Hannibal.’

Hannibal buries his hands into the ground and scrabbles until he finds something that looks like hair, but under closer inspection reveals itself to be a root.

Will allows his expression to speak for him.

‘Any leftover roots can resprout, Will. There is little point to doing this at all if we’re not going to do it right.’

‘Great. Let’s not do it at all then.’

Hannibal ignores him, fingers back to raking through the wet ground. Hair is falling into his eyes, but he can’t do much about it wearing the thick gardener’s gloves—he expels a harsher breath to displace a particularly bothersome strand.

Will sits back. Dew from the ground will seep into the seat of his pants, but there is nothing for it: his knees cannot support him when this is what he has to deal with.

‘It’s a shame we left it so long. I would have liked some watercress in time for Easter,’ Hannibal tells him idly. ‘Perhaps we can have it next year. It is an easy plant to maintain. I was thinking of tomatoes, too, though I worry how they’ll fare in this climate. Maybe we should wait until summer and see.’

Will swallows. ‘Sure.’

‘We’ll need to get water out here. I think a longer hose from the tap by the barn would be fine for now—’

‘Could build you a well,’ Will smiles. ‘For falling into.’

Sun gleams off Hannibal’s teeth, a flash of pearly white. ‘Headfirst,’ he promises. ‘Will you pull me out once my curiosity has been satisfied?’

‘You’re too heavy. I’ll feed you though.’

‘You will? I appreciate that.’

‘You’d better.’

Hannibal is delighted. There is a moment when Will imagines him tipping his head back, made greedy, waiting for Will to push himself up into a kiss—he doesn't. Hannibal restricts his gluttony. Perhaps he worries there would soon be nothing left of Will if he started on him in earnest.

Needing desperately to focus on something else, Will considers the white-fenced plot of land. 'This is going to be a lot of work, isn't it?'

'At first.'

He sees no real way of managing the project. The happy pills Hannibal has given him have helped, but they are not enough to combat the melancholy that has set into Will's bones. He is increased in energy, but lacks vision: how is he to motivate himself into growing tomatoes that he can't believe will ever be picked?

Hannibal must sense something of this in the slope of Will's shoulders. 'We have entered a time of transformation. Perhaps tomorrow you will be reborn a gardener.'

Right, Easter Sunday. A time for resurrection, a time for ascension. Hannibal has been on about this for a while now, though less so at home. Mostly, he spams Will's inbox with convoluted metaphors about how Christ rising again is a fantastic occasion for the Other Will to do the same.

Were you not a fisher of men? he asked him just yesterday. *Do you not seek to bring justice onto those who have wronged the meek? Were you not fell by your Judas' betrayal?*

Didn't Judas hang himself? Will wrote back. *Go try that if you're so eager. I'll be behind a rock*

'This isn't Bible camp,' Will tells him now. 'Don't bother with your allegories.'

'I thought you liked my stories,' Hannibal teases. 'So much so that you're eager to analyse the folklore influences, no less.'

'Your stories, sure. They're real.'

This, again, delights him. 'Are they?'

To you they are, Will thinks. That much is obvious.

'I suppose many things become real in the telling,' Hannibal reflects. 'I often advise patients to share their innermost realizations with others if they struggle to believe themselves. We have told our stories enough to afford them a certain tangibility—how much has the tale of resurrection been told through generations?'

'And we're back to Jesus.'

Hannibal stands. He cuts a dark figure in the sun; Will has to squint to keep looking at him.

'Our words have power,' Hannibal says.

‘Ground-breaking.’

‘Tell me you’re going to pick tomatoes with me this summer, Will.’

Will’s throat is dry. He is floored: floored by Hannibal’s faith in the summer to come, by how much he wants to convince Will to believe, too, by how much he *wants* it. By how Hannibal believes in it all—in faerie hunters, in the future, the way out of the woods, revenants and splits and the Other—how Will has driven him to insanity but somehow it has not made him weak. It’s made him stronger. How Will envies him this madness.

‘I’ll pick tomatoes with you this summer,’ he utters weakly. And for that single moment, he is almost willing to believe it.

He imagines that the matter of shadow selves, repressed desires and the faerie has been laid to rest for now; he does not mention it again and Hannibal is naturally wary of bringing up the topic of the Other unprompted. He wouldn’t want Will to think the Other is on his mind, of course—Will is aware that being jealous of himself is some involved insanity, but he persists in it anyway.

Largely, he is correct in this assumption. Hannibal keeps mum on the topic, devoting his energies instead to everyday matters and doting on Will with a focus that reeks of desperation. It makes Will afraid that he is doing worse than he thought.

After Easter, Hannibal goes so far as to neglect writing the Other Will. Oh, he replies, always, but never initiates conversations the way he used to, never hankers for the Other’s attention, never wakes him from naps and bleak daydreams with the buzz of phone against his thigh. It’s a power play. He is trying to starve him into a more horrid kind of hunger. He is trying to prove something ugly about Will that he doesn’t care to be proven. He is playing hard to get. He is, perhaps, just being an asshole.

Or maybe he has grown bored and prefers now to exchange messages with Tobias Budge instead. After the recent fiasco when Hannibal found the little emergency fund Will has completely forgotten he’d put in the study desk, Will was compelled to throw Beverly under the bus and she decided that a juicy case file was an appropriate white flag to wave under a serial killer’s nose—Will wonders sometimes if he was just as out of touch back when he worked for the FBI. So, Will’s seen the file. Will knows. Whatever is going on between Hannibal and Budge is no longer entirely a private affair: the scene Budge staged at the Philharmonic was designed precisely to appeal to Hannibal Lecter’s tastes. Either the two had met and spoken at length, or Hannibal’s patient told his friend a great deal about his psychiatrist’s appreciation for the mournful sweetness of string instruments. Will is pretty sure he knows which one is more likely.

The Other Will might soon share the fate of Randall Tier: cursed to transform into a beast that stalks but lacks the courage to strike, made weak by jealousy, made pathetic by refusing to get off the stage once the lights have gone off. He imagines it sometimes. It is not altogether an unpleasant fantasy, since it ends always with Hannibal, white from pain and red from blood, finding out exactly what happens to ungrateful bastards with a short attention span.

After five days of near radio silence, Will has had enough.

And that is how he discovers Hannibal has not forgotten their conversation on faerie desires.

It's another day when he is home alone. He closes his eyes, conjures the image of Hannibal's panting, dying, final realization, and pulls out his burner. Hannibal is between sessions—Will has his schedule written out in stupidly flowery hand, though he cannot know for sure how much of it is truth and how much fluff to fill in the edges of dedicated plotting time. Anyway, Hannibal has no excuse not to answer.

I'm thinking of how I'm going to kill you, he writes.

He expects a polite inquiry for more details. He is stretching already under his blanket to find a more comfortable position in which to indulge him.

He is to be disappointed.

You have told me you take the lives of those who must die because there is no other way, and not the lives of those who deserve it.

Is he still upset about that? God.

So?

If what you claim is true, I must infer your threats on my life are only talk.

Will can't help the snort of derision. It is loud and uncouth enough that Winston and Buster both look up from their contentious cheese bone, some gourmet nonsense imported from Switzerland.

No, Will replies promptly.

No? But surely you don't need to kill me. It is not the only way.

Isn't it?

No, Will. I don't believe that.

Good for you I guess. You'll die an optimist

Do you think that by keeping my Will alive, I am refusing you? That you cannot fully achieve material form until I have relinquished him to death? Is that the problem?

It is a good question and possibly a good answer.

Maybe

Then you know my proposed solution. A re-enactment of the divide to bring the twin halves into one.

This again.

Easter Sunday hasn't brought Hannibal his desired reunion, so now he wants to re-enact when he should be seeking, like Will, to appease and expel. Fresh nonsense, and what for? Hannibal wants him to be both, but Will *cannot*. Both cannot be real at once—how does Hannibal not understand this simple truth? How is Will to see Hannibal for who he is and still let him cradle Will's head in his hands? How is he to reign *and* let go? To protect *and* to punish? To want and to deny?

It is too much.

Will is not strong enough.

A re-enactment you have no idea how to enact, he types back bitterly, *to trap and fuse me into one with a figment of the imagination you've trained to eat from your hand and bend over when you say down? Sounds great*

What would the re-enactment re-enact anyway? Hannibal believing there is no way forward for them, that he must be rid of Will once and for all, only to never go through with it? Is Will to be struck down again by illness, by physical impairment and madness, made feeble, made weak, made helpless, only to be placed in Hannibal's care? Brought again to his lowest point, to an utter loss of all control? Fearful of Hannibal's hand, yearning for it despite? How exactly would that help?

I understand you might not have faith in my scheme, but I do wonder why you speak so crudely of your twin. Could it be that you're envious?

That knocks the wind out of Will's sails for sure.

Envious

A breath.

Why the fuck would I be envious?

He can just imagine the self-satisfied smirk playing on Hannibal's lips, convinced he is privy to some greater truth about Will that no one else can possibly comprehend. This is what he gets for writing him in the first place. He should have left well enough alone—

Will has something you do not and you resent him for it. The very definition of envy.

Yeah? What's he got? A full-time maid? :(

I see him every day.

Will closes his eyes briefly.

Don't even try, he warns. Asks.

Would you allow me to see you?

Pleads. *I can't*

Hannibal takes a solid minute to reply. Will's stomach knots, his lungs seize on air. His toes curl into the blanket, pinching fabric until it hurts.

Will and I have been speaking of you lately. He had some curious insights. The cold seek warmth. The helpless seek power. Do we not want most what we believe antithetical to who we are?

I don't know, do we?

What do you want, Will?

Will takes a deep breath through his nose. He shuts his eyes, typing blindly—he would know his way around these keys even if he were robbed of all senses. *You know what I want.*

Yes. I recall you mentioned wanting to kill me on occasion.

Will mentioned wanting to kill him at the onset of this goddamn conversation, but why nit-pick.

I am more interested in the things you want but refuse to acknowledge as possibilities. You refuse to see me because you don't believe you can be seen. Or perhaps you do not believe you can be cared for like your twin is? Treasured like he is?

Will's heart thunders in his chest. His fingers press at a few keys without purpose.

Before he can think of anything to write that is not another plea, Hannibal lands the final blow.

Loved?

Will rips the blanket off. He drops a cushion, he kicks off another, he discards everything that is not his.

He walks.

Shoeless, coatless, burner clutched painfully in one hand, he walks. There is sun enough, but the earth still seeps cold. He does not care. He does not stop.

Enough. A boundary has been crossed.

He does not stop until he is behind the treeline, ensconced in the smell of conifers and wet earth, safely savage again.

Here, surrounded by greenery and by threat, by possibility and by the inevitable, he does not care whether he is haunted, possessed, delusional. He doesn't care whether he is lying to himself, duped into grandeur, duped into foolishness. He needs no reassurance. He requires no comfort. He stands, shivering in the cold, and doesn't mind. *That* is power.

That is what he wants.

What are you up to

Hunting, comes Hannibal's reply. *Are we done with our previous conversation then?*

Who's the prey?

Doctor Frederick Chilton. Do you remember him?

He has the keys to the beast's cage. He has the beast's ear pinched between his fingers and the beast will listen. He will not have innocents mauled, only those who deserve it. He will spare little thought to who does or does not have to die—he will consider the sum of their sins and he will judge accordingly.

You disapprove.

I'm disappointed with you, Hannibal. You're wasting your time on imagined slights. On chicks pecking at your ankles.

He will use Hannibal to exert his justice, to butter his bread, to prepare his baths. He will have Hannibal under him like he had under him Donald Sutcliffe, he will have him between his thighs, he will take his life—the strength of him, the sun in his smile, the trust and the faith in his eyes, the sweet summer of his sweat.

There's nothing appealing to a boy stomping around the woods, throwing stones at squirrels. You should be killing wolves.

He will show him how little he cares for his fantasies of need. He will show him what it is to feel true need, true helplessness, true humiliation—

How about Tobias Budge?

Chapter End Notes

We're catching up to present day! Next week, we finally find out what exactly happened after Tobias Budge showed up in Wolf Trap.

I'm away visiting friends and have had no time to reply to comments, so here's a thank-you note to the commenters at large - I promise to get back to you next week ;)

The Two Wills

Chapter Summary

There is an intruder in the house. Will makes an important decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Two Wills.

This is what Will remembers: blood.

Blood rushing to his ears as he watches Hannibal's tense shoulders, back turned on him. It is so much easier to pierce and hook him, to find the weak spot and twist the knife, when he is sending him messages only and cannot see the way his shoulders tense in response.

Blood in Hannibal's cheeks, blood up the length of his nose crawling ever so slowly toward the skull, drawing a tinnitus hum into his ears—Will bites the lobe of one and then the other, tugging with his teeth to elicit a breathless chuckle. He was meant to empty Hannibal of the last drop of life, meant to absorb it and grow stronger, but he is failing tragically—if anything, he is pushing, forcing, gifting Hannibal his own life so he might feel everything, so he might live forever—fuck any sort of possession at all except whatever the hell this is.

Blood on the floor. There is so much blood in his wake, a crimson ghost of Hannibal's body that he drags relentlessly toward death.

He remembers his hands.

His hands tight around Hannibal's phone, screen split in the middle. Hannibal won't get it replaced because it is now a metaphor, and God forbid they claim insurance on anything that breaks for the purposes of metaphor. It isn't easy to get a hold of Hannibal's phone these days, but Will knows how much he dislikes having it on him when he cooks and knows by now all his hiding spots—this time it has been slipped into the pocket of the jacket left on the back of the chair in the study, close enough to the kitchen that Hannibal might venture in and check for messages when he's waiting for the water to boil.

'Doctor Lecter?'

'Franklyn,' Will says into the receiver. 'You need to put a solid mile between yourself and Tobias Budge.'

His hands on the jacket as he replaces the phone. Hannibal will see the call history. Depending on whether Franklyn goes to the police or to Budge, they will see the call history,

too. A desperate gambit bound to end badly for him, only to try and fail to save his own soul. If Hannibal kills Tobias Budge like the Other ordered, Will can carry that sin. If Tobias Budge kills Hannibal, Will can carry that, too. He is not sure he can carry Franklyn.

His hands on Hannibal's flesh, warm and warmer. His hands on the floor as Will, too, crawls, rolls, feels desperately at the boards and the mattress, searching for an opening—this is a memory and not a dream, right? He did cut into this bed once, months ago, and he did slip a knife into the wound that would never close?

He's got the order all wrong. It should go: hands first, blood second, that's the order of things remembered. It is all happening at once in Will's mind, the gun going off and the Tobias Budge's feet landing on the floor and Hannibal's cut-off moan as Will first breaches him. Once he has the knife, maybe he can call out—maybe if he shouts, *I called Franklyn,* he could distract Budge—

There. There it is in his hand. Months and lifetimes have passed since he held it last. The knife feels different now than it did then. Or is the knife the same, and his hands different?

Elbows and knees and pointed toes, Will shoves himself into the light, the unrestrained breeze from the open window a shock of cold on his bare back. He braces himself for a leap, but then—

'You shouldn't leave it open like this. You have bugs coming in.'

Budge makes to close the window. He lowers the gun.

And Hannibal *loses it.*

Will does not spring into action. Action is unnecessary. The hold he'd thought he had on the keys was illusory after all—the cage is open wide, the breeze flitters in. The beast has broken loose.

Hannibal is a fury of skin and teeth. He is savagery incarnate, he is a temple to chaos. If he knows what he is doing, he does not show it; if he remembers who he is, he hides it well. Tobias Budge is strong and he has a metal rod clasped in his hand which, if he had a moment to think, he might remember is a gun—he does not get that moment. He gets no relief from the deep-bone desperation storming wrath upon him and he can wrestle no advantage, either, when he is intrinsically hampered by the fact that his brain is dedicated to knowing such idle things as, *it is just past nine o'clock* and *I'm in Wolf Trap, Washington,* and, *my name is Tobias Budge.*

The thing tearing his body to shreds has no need to bother with such insignificant detail. It knows need only; and it needs only for Tobias Budge to die.

As Will watches, he finds that for this one moment he believes it all. He believes that there was a boy in the woods and that there was a hunter, that Will was possessed by a spirit and not merely cowardly, that the prince cut his own stomach open to find the peapod and that deals with faeries are struck with the first bite of a still-beating heart.

Afterward they lie side-by-side both: the emptied-out carcass of what used to be Tobias Budge and the still-gasping body of what used to be Hannibal Lecter. His bare skin is stained with blood, gut and semen.

Light-headed, Will stalks over to them. A pellet of flesh sits stuck to Hannibal's lower lip. Hannibal does not seem aware of it. His blank gaze drifts languidly across the ceiling as though he is intent on taking in all the places the paint shows signs of wear.

Will hunches, reaching instinctively to flick the piece of flesh off—and he recoils back. How ridiculously stupid to try and put your fingers anywhere near that mouth right now.

Instead, he takes the gun from where Budge dropped it and uses the barrel to gather the bit of skin from Hannibal's glistening lip.

It is only then that the whole of it hits.

He falls back to the floor, blood slicking his bare ass, his hands shaking so violently he has to tuck them in his armpits and press down hard. He did not mean for this to happen—did he?

Did you know, he mimes the question with his lips. Did you know this would happen?

There is no answer. The Other Will never was one to give Will the answers he wanted. He needs Hannibal for this. Hannibal knows how to push, twist, bait, how to manoeuvre him into revealing himself—Will fists his hand and imagines the shape of the burner in it, the click of the keys beneath his fingers.

Of course you knew, Hannibal would say. *You knew exactly what would happen. You are too clever to pretend otherwise.*

My brain has also been a waste-field of executive dysfunction ever since *you* decided to have your fun with it, Will wants to point out.

I thought Franklyn would go to the police after I called him, he argues instead. *I thought I could get you to prison on a murder charge for Budge. That would humble you a little, but it wouldn't kill you. I was trying to spare your life from the Other Will's rage—don't you see?*

You knew Franklyn would go to Tobias, Hannibal counters. *You drew me into bed and you tore down my defences because you wanted me defenceless. You wanted me at your mercy like you once were, and you wanted to refuse me like I refused you. You would not deign even to use your own hands—after all, I had been inattentive, I had lain with the man you don't want to be, and I dared hold conversation with another killer. What had I earned except humiliation?*

Are you calling me petty?

No, Hannibal laughs. He is definitely calling him petty.

And so, Will is here. He got what he wanted. All that is left to do is pry up the floorboards and leave Hannibal's body to rot underneath.

He watches Hannibal's chest rise and fall. All that is left to do is sit and watch as he dies—Will no longer feels elation at the prospect of seeing the life drain from his eyes, but he is hardly going to walk out and leave him alone.

Something isn't right. This is it, he has arrived at the end: half of Will should be gone. Satisfied with his blood sacrifice, the vengeful spirit that likes to possess broken men in horrible love should have departed him, or else the broken man in horrible love should have faded away into the world of wolves and faeries.

Instead, they are here.

An awful conviction lodges itself in Will's chest, refusing to budge, a conviction that they have been here before. Did Hannibal not prophesize that they would be here again, that they were destined to re-enact their story in its mirror reflection? A new bear has come. The faerie king has possessed another desperate man to leave behind who he is and give himself over to rending flesh. Another boy brimming with violent fury has struck out to kill the one who tends to him—and an ending has come to reveal itself a choice. Hallucinations have been made palpable. They are now a story realized.

In the wake of all this, that which seemed insurmountable before—healing the split, managing twin extremes—the sheer impossibility of being both, wanting both, living with both—it all strikes Will as easy compared to sitting here, watching passively as Hannibal bleeds out into the creaks between the floorboards of their home.

Who cares if he can't reach agreement within himself? He has everything he needs: a Will who wants to save Hannibal, and another who knows how.

Hannibal's Will draws in a shuddering breath. The Other Will releases it. And then Will blinks, and pushes himself to his feet, and tells Hannibal's unconscious body spread out before him,

'If you die on the way to the hospital, sweetheart, I really am going to kill you.'

This is the plan.

Step one, get Hannibal to hospital. Can't call an ambulance on account of the very dead massacre of a body in the middle of the lounge that no one would ever believe was self-defence. No, step one: drive Hannibal to hospital. Put on clothes first. Make sure the dogs locked in the kitchen have water to last them a night of anxiety. Should he take the truck or the Bentley? Vaguely he realizes this might matter later. What about Budge's car? Did he come by car? He could take Budge's car. No, that is ludicrous—he has too many cars to choose from is the problem. Which car he takes depends on what he does later, and what he does later depends on what he intends to do with the body. Step one: decide what he's going to do with body. Step one: when is he going to do whatever he's doing with the body? No, fuck—the bleeding. Stop the bleeding first.

Will secures Hannibal's bunched up pyjamas to the gushing wound of his knee with a belt. As he does, he shushes the sounds of pain that Hannibal isn't making—why is he not voicing

pain? Is he too far gone for pain? His eyes are open but they can't even follow Will properly —and Will resolves what step two of his plan should be.

Step two: less planning, more doing. Out of the two, Will is decidedly better at doing.

He puts on a pair of pants and heavy-duty boots. In the fog of urgency, he can't remember where he is supposed to look for shirts, so he forgoes one in favour of zipping up his jacket. The lining of the boots feels odd and itchy on his bare feet.

In a stroke of inspiration, he grabs the rifle off the wall above the fireplace and slings it over his back.

He half-carries, half-drags Hannibal into the Bentley. That is closest, which is how Will decides it is their car of choice. His arms burn under Hannibal's dead weight. He leaves him lying on the back seat, covered with a blanket they keep in the trunk for when Will gets cold, buckled in across the stomach. He is shaking with shock and blood loss. His injured leg jostles horribly.

The roads are dead smears, the gibbous moon a silver coin. It's a good thing they took the Bentley after all: though Will is unused to steering it, he is at least familiar with the dashboard and where to go for the GPS. He's not sure he'd know where D.C. was otherwise. Oh, he does *know* where it is, but translating the knowledge into left and right turns is another matter altogether. He is also hoping he's less likely to be pulled over driving an expensive car. He doesn't have his license back yet.

Will watches Hannibal in the rear-view mirror, wishing horribly for a word, a moan, a wince of pain. The silence in the car is suffocating. The minute trembling of Hannibal's body is too weak to break through the hum of wheels on concrete.

'There wasn't anything you could have done to heal the split,' Will finds himself saying. 'You did seem to understand the split better than I did, though. In your own insane way. You knew neither Will was more than halfway real.'

Hannibal says nothing. The road ahead of Will grows blurry and salty. He blinks it away.

'They were both stories told to lull fears away. To explain the world in black-and-white. But they couldn't be lived.'

Nothing.

'I don't want to tell stories about living anymore.'

Nothing, nothing, nothing—

'Fuck it. I will be both. I will be all. I will be the hunter and the king, the dead and the void. Come on, Hannibal. Nothing? I thought you'd jump right on that.'

The E.R. blinks red and blue with ambulances, with neon lights and the scrubs of hospital staff. The very real terror Will feels sells the very fake performance he gives.

‘Try to stay calm, please. Can you explain what happened?’

‘Gun—gunshot to the wound, I mean—the knee, I was—’

‘Were you hunting?’

Will doesn’t have to act out suddenly remembering the rifle still heavy on his shoulder. It startles him to see it. ‘Yeah—it was an accident, we were—you need to get him into surgery —’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No, no—I—’

‘This way,’ someone else is saying. Hannibal’s disappeared on a stretcher, off to somewhere Will can’t follow. ‘We’ll check you over and then you’ll tell us a little more, alright, sweetie?’

He can feel the blood drying on his ass and thighs. He follows the nurse obediently inside. He asks for the restroom. When she turns away, he slips into a gaggle of residents and disappears back out the door.

The air is stifling tonight. In his zipped-up jacket, Will boils, but he can’t very well take it off and reveal a bare chest crusted with a terror of blood. Some of it is Hannibal’s. Back in the Bentley, Will gets the engine running on the second go, then wrenches the front of the jacket open so he can touch this red evidence of life.

Step one of the plan has been a success. As Will makes his way back to Wolf Trap, he ponders a step two. Some muddling of the waters should possibly be step two—he will be questioned eventually. Fortunately, his rifle gambit has bought him some time. The hospital staff will be in little hurry to report a hunting mishap to the police, and once the police get involved it will take them another good while to identify a naked man, even if that naked man has Hannibal Lecter’s singular features and was all but pushed out of a black Bentley.

The Bentley.

Will smacks a hand on the wheel to relieve the burst of satisfaction. Thank God his brain is better at making connections than it is at planning ahead.

The moment he arrives home, he rushes past the body on the floor and the pool of blood. He ignores the dogs’ ruckus, swallowing against the weight that it sets in his lungs. In the upstairs bedroom, he finds his burner. In the drawer he rips from the desk in the study, he finds the card for Hannibal’s preferred taxi service, given to him once upon a time in a bout of petty offense.

From his everyday Will’s phone, he copies the number into the Other Will’s phone. The body doesn’t smell yet, but it will start to, soon.

‘Abigail.’

There is a moment of confusion. ‘Will? Is that you?’

‘It’s me. I need you to do something for me. I’m going to give you a number. Can you write it down?’

He feels bad for dragging her into this. He has little choice.

‘I—okay. Go on.’

Will turns over the card. He gives her the number.

‘Call and ask for a car to pick you up,’ he instructs slowly, not wanting either Abigail or himself to miss anything. ‘Take it to Hannibal’s house and wait. Tell the driver to wait, too. Don’t go anywhere and don’t accept any calls unless it’s from this number.’

‘What’s going on? Where—’

‘Hannibal is at the hospital. I need your help. Please.’

Her breath hitches. ‘Of course.’

‘Good. This is the important part: tell them you want a black Bentley. A—damn it—’ he searches through memory, hazy and fractured. ‘I think it’s an Arnage. Tell them you got their number from Hannibal Lecter, maybe they know what he drives. Get a car as close to that as possible.’

This subterfuge out of the way, it becomes high time to take care of the body.

First, Will finds in the various pockets of his suit the car keys, the phone, the wallet, pocketing every piece of Tobias Budge’s identity until his face loses definition and his name sounds off in Will’s mind. He needs his blood, too. What has been flowing out of Budge has by now congealed; Will picks up his gun and shoots him with it, triggering another burst of crimson that he collects into a jar. Hannibal had kept candied tangerine skins in this jar. It’s empty now, save for the blood—Will has eaten them all.

How to dispose of a body is a big question, but Will’s possible answers are mercifully limited. His limbs are already weak from manhandling Hannibal and his mind is already overexerted from stress. There really is only one step three that Will is capable of seeing through.

Budge’s foot gets stuck on one of the white posts at the gate. The upper half of his body drops into the pit Will has dug, hips balanced precariously on the edge. Will takes Budge’s shoes off, then shoves him all the way in.

Covering Budge back up with dirt is a taller order than preparing the garden was, if only because Will is already exhausted. Sweat pools down his neck, diluting the blood on his ass, making him drip pink down the legs of his pants. He knew the garden would be a lot of work. He imagines for a moment what might grow from such a seed: spruces, maples and willows, he suspects, to shape into the necks and front plates of violins that will reverberate with Tobias Budge’s terror.

He completes the picture with an extra layer of fertilizer. If the FBI get the dogs in, they're fucked anyway. Hopefully their resources won't stretch that far.

Next, he puts on Budge's shoes. It's a little clunky to walk in them. The discomfort is compounded when Will runs: away from the house, away from the garden, his own boots in one hand and the blood jar in the other. He is sure to sprain his ankle; he feels halfway to falling anytime he touches the ground.

He doesn't fall. He leaves Budge's footprints in the wet ground and he sprays Budge's blood over bushes and stones. None of this will hold up to forensic scrutiny. Will is counting on selling the story well enough that little forensic scrutiny is applied.

A mile or so from the house, he decides to find the road. Hannibal's phone draws a map of all grey, with single white veins cut into the mass like afterthoughts. Will is looking at it so intently he nearly walks into the car.

It's a green SUV: not what Budge would have picked for himself, Will is sure, but clearly what he picked for going on a murder spree. The paint disappears neatly into the foliage. The woods are eager to help Will tonight, if they led him on a path to this bounty.

Will finds the car keys he's pilfered from the corpse. The lock clicks; the engine starts.

The car gets Will to the road. They drive.

Will doesn't know where he is going.

'This is why you're supposed to do this part,' he mumbles under his breath. Hannibal is not here and cannot hear him. He wonders if, miles away, he is conscious at all. Probably not.

Where the hell is he supposed to go? The story that has crystalized in his mind is as follows: something-something, Budge broke in, Budge shot Hannibal, Hannibal injured Budge defending himself. Budge ran. If Budge is meant to be running, Will should take the car to Mexico. To Canada. To another state at the very least. He should drive it into a lake—that is, he is certain, easier said than done.

Fear knots in his stomach. Maybe he should just keep driving. The road ahead is empty, clear. It disappears into the dark of the horizon—he could keep driving until he reached it, until nothing and no one concerned him no more. Untethered, unperturbed, unfeeling—at least he would be free. At least he would be alive.

Or—Will needs a place for the car. Where do cars go?

It is nearing one when he rings her doorbell.

Bedelia du Maurier emerges from the monstrosity of her house wearing a flimsy satin robe, hair tied back in a loose bun, and the most sophisticated expression of repudiation Will has seen in his life.

'You mind if I park in your garage for the night?'

She absolutely does mind.

But Will's jacket is zipped halfway up only, and the blood shows through.

'What have you done?' Bedelia asks in a rough whisper. 'Where is Hannibal?'

It takes Will a moment to connect the tightness of her voice with the shade of concern on her face. He laughs. 'Oh, I didn't kill him,' he says with an incredulous amusement that should really be reserved for people who have neither fantasized nor attempted such an act. 'I didn't do anything. I didn't have to. But he's in surgery now, so it's up to me to clean up the mess.'

Her eyes are fixed on Will's chin. She swallows.

'You have a big garage. It's a shame for all that space to go waste. I promise I'll come pick it up later.'

'Fine.' Bedelia leans her head on the doorjamb, defeated and annoyed with it. 'Do keep in mind that if I have the FBI on my doorstep tomorrow morning, I am telling them you held me at gunpoint.'

They are both aware Will is doing exactly that, only he doesn't need a gun.

'Oh,' Will remembers. 'I'm also going to need a ride back to Wolf Trap.'

Step three—four? five?—of Will's plan is to shower. He is sick of carrying the smell of blood on him wherever he goes. When this is done, he picks a street in D.C. at random to perform the switch—Abigail arrives in her rented Bentley, Will arrives in Hannibal's Bentley, the driver gets all of the money Beverly once left Will in the desk drawer. Will hopes the tip might stop him thinking too much. He's peering at them with plenty suspicion already; Will prays to God he's thinking forbidden tryst and not alibi for murder.

He's left both his phones at Wolf Trap. He has on him only Hannibal's cell, which he gives to Abigail.

'Seatbelt,' he says. 'Then call Jack Crawford and put him on speaker.'

Abigail buckles in. Her body language is that of an animal contemplating fight or flight.

'Wait—you have a license?' Will remembers.

'Yes?

'New plan. You drive, I call.'

Abigail looks possibly more anxious at the thought. 'Do you know how much this car costs?' she asks when she slips into the driver's seat and wraps her fingers around the wheel.

'Did they tell you what he drove, then?'

‘No, I googled it.’ She bites her lip. ‘I’ve only ever driven my old car. And that was a while ago.’

‘If you wreck it, I’ll tell Hannibal I did. He’ll believe that. Drive.’

Abigail pulls into the road. Their pace is so snail-like it is sure to drive Will out of his mind. It does make it easier, though, to scroll through Hannibal’s phone for the right number.

Jack picks up after the first beep. ‘Hello?’

‘It’s me,’ Will says. ‘Hannibal’s—’

‘He just got out of surgery, yeah. I know where he is. Where the hell are you, Will?’

Do the police really have nothing better to do than investigate hunting accidents? For fuck’s sake.

‘We’re on our way to the hospital. I went to get Abigail.’

‘What happened, Will? They told me hunting accident was the story, but any idiot could see that doesn’t track—and then you go and disappear on us—’

‘No, no, we were attacked. A man—Budge, his name is Tobias Budge I think—he’s Hannibal’s patient or, no, a friend of his patient—he shot him—I grabbed the rifle because I didn’t know what to do, I was scared he’d come after us, and then the people at the ER saw it and they assumed—’

‘You were attacked? Jesus, Will.’

‘Yeah—fuck!’

Abigail has discovered the benefits of a quality motor. The propulsion punches Will back into his seat.

‘What’s that? You alright?’

‘I’m fine,’ Will breathes. ‘I wanted to call you, but I forgot my phone at Wolf Trap. I don’t know how to use Hannibal’s. I couldn’t figure it out—and then I forgot—Abigail had to help me.’

Abigail casts him a look.

‘Okay. Alright, just get yourself to the hospital, Will. I’ll meet you at reception.’

Will hangs up. He urgently needs to go over his story again. He needs to see Hannibal more urgently than that.

More urgently still: Will goes into messages and deletes all those Hannibal has exchanged with the Other.

It feels like ripping pages from a beloved album and using the photographs as kindling for the fire. It is what must be done. This is the phone that Will used to call Franklyn—there is no doubt it will eventually make its way into Jack Crawford's hands.

'What happened?'

Abigail's eyes are fixed on the road. The orange lights of the highway draw attention to, consecutively, her eyes, her neck concealed from view with a scarf, her chapped lips.

'Hannibal and I were attacked. The guy shot Hannibal in the knee, Hannibal managed to get the gun from him, shot back,' Will lists, assigning each event a number in his head so he doesn't get lost. 'The guy was injured and he ran. I drove Hannibal to the hospital. I went to pick you up from the ward. I was shaken—

'That's not what I'm asking.'

'I was shaken,' Will repeats firmly. 'I was covered in blood. I wanted to take you back to the hospital but you said no. You took me to Hannibal's house, I showered, I calmed down. Now we're going to see Hannibal.'

'Tell me what happened!'

Will takes a breath. 'No.'

The car is silent as Abigail fights to calm down her breathing. There are tears in her eyes. 'I can't corroborate a lie when I don't know the truth,' she says in a mockery of logic. None of this is about logic. Will hasn't seen anything resembling logic in their lives for months, and months are the whole and complete scope of his lifetime.

'You can.' He looks out the passenger's window, where the empty outline of his reflection stares back. 'You've done it before. I've done it before, for you. That is how we roll.'

She hesitates. Then, she resigns herself to acceptance. 'Did Hannibal tell you?'

Will snorts. 'Hannibal didn't tell me anything. Communication isn't our strong suit.'

The joke doesn't relax her even a fraction. Will tries a different tactic.

'You know what it's like to kill in self-defence. You know that it's not always about self-defence. All I'm asking is that you help him the way he helped you. Can you do that?'

He looks at her now. Her jaw is so tight it hurts him to see it.

'Abigail?'

She gives a small nod.

Will exhales. 'Thank you.'

'I'm doing it for Hannibal,' she says blankly. 'Not you.'

Will has anticipated this. He has told himself many times he would not care, that it isn't vital. He is not so married to Hannibal's fantasy as to expect that she should love him back—it is better for her if she does not.

It is still a pain unlike any other.

She might be distrustful of Will, but it is Hannibal she is punishing when she very intentionally parks the car right into an orange parking pole. The crunch reverberates in the bones of Will's skull. He bites down on his tongue and tastes blood.

He wonders if she is angry because Hannibal got himself shot or because he made himself blind. They are both entirely fair grievances to which a dented bumper does little justice. Will doesn't point this out. He can understand pettiness.

Jack is waiting for them at reception: a dark-clad, sleep-deprived gatekeeper.

'I need to see Hannibal first,' Will pre-empts him.

'Doctor Lecter will be out for hours. He's not going anywhere.'

'Then we can talk in his room.'

Jack relents easily. He has a one-track mind, but Will suspects he is aware of this and wishes sometimes it could be different. Without complaint, he leads Abigail and Will down the corridor, shoes squeaky on the linoleum, past a vending machine pushed into a corner by the window and the grey bathroom doors that make Will taste again the memory of cold water, the blare of light, the way Hannibal had to reassure him that he knew the way back to his bed.

There is a glass screen set in the door to the room. Through it, Will sees his bed, his humming monitors, Hannibal's creaky plastic chair and the shutters half-open to let in the glow of the night sky. This is not Will's old room, they're in an entirely other ward, which matters little when it looks to Will just the same and smells no different.

Hannibal lies on a thin pillow, beneath a sheet stained with some stray body fluid or perhaps disinfectant, his face yellow in the meagre light of the bedside lamp. His eyes are shut loosely in sleep, moving jerkily beneath the lashes. Though he cannot possibly meet Will's gaze, Will imagines him doing so in his dream. Through the glass of the screen, their eyes would meet for the split of a second. In Hannibal's dream, this means something.

It might be that it means the same thing to Hannibal asleep as it does to Will awake. Will feels as though in this moment something in the world clicks, as though the past and the future, reality and possibility are jigsaw puzzles that have snapped into place. Or perhaps the click is in Will only: in the way that the two halves of him, forced together by necessity and circumstance, have finally aligned.

Chapter End Notes

Next week, the secrets Will has been keeping finally reach their tipping point.

Thank you for reading!

The Deal

Chapter Summary

> Will has important conversations with Abigail and Jack. To push himself into having one with Hannibal, he might need a change of scenery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty: The Deal.

The street drums under the wheels of cars, under the wheels of strollers, under Will's feet. The afternoon sun petals on Will's face. The petals, the flickers, the shapes of leaves dance on Will's cheeks, blinding once and other times painting red flowers on his eyelids. In the air, there is the smell of sweet blossoms and the smell of gas. From the display of a florist's blink at Will the pinks of sweet peas, roses, of peonies. They smell heady and full.

Will remembers what Abigail has told them once, about what it feels to walk in the streets at night, surrounded by people and smells and the world. This is what she meant: Will feels real. In his too-large T-shirt lent by Jack, in boots too warm for the weather, nothing on him except the money he had to borrow and the bread he carries as a gift of sustenance for a childhood ghost, Will feels more real than he has in a long time, just as real as the people pushing the strollers, driving the cars, selling the flowers—he has wondered why the Faerie King would ever want to exchange the fantastical land he governs for the fumes and noises of civilisation, but he understands now. He didn't want the fumes or the noises or the civilisation. Will wanted real.

He has not slept and he has not eaten. His body threatens to fail him with every step. And yet, he wants almost to keep walking forever, past the horizon, past the borders of the city and the final frontier.

He will not walk that far. He has fresh buns, still warm, and he has the good butter and jam to take back to Hannibal in the hope he might eat. Greater than the freedom of walking forever is the freedom he finds in the ease with which denial comes.

'I want that for you.'

Abigail lifts her head. She's dozed off at the side of Hannibal's bed, their fingers intertwined. Will's whole body aches at the sight.

'Mhmm—what?'

'I want you to feel free.'

She blinks blearily some first flutters of a dream. When she extracts her hand from Hannibal's, he shifts and hums, but does not wake.

Will clears his throat. This will not be easy to say. He knows all at once that he must.

'I want you to get out of the country,' he says softly.

Abigail stares at him.

'When Hannibal wakes up, I don't know what he'll be,' he presses on, determined. 'When he sees clearly, I don't know what that's going to do. I want you to get the hell out of dodge in case.'

She doesn't bother denying the possibility he might hurt her. 'You say that like you want to keep me safe,' she accuses. 'But people don't react very well to being abandoned.'

He sees the ghost of her father pass over her features.

'Is that really how you want to be dropping anchor, Abigail? Not because you're thriving or because you're trying—because you're afraid? Again?'

Her cheeks redden. 'I'm not a coward.'

'No. You're a survivor.'

And to convince her, Will needs to speak the language of survivors.

'Go down to Hannibal's basement. Don't dawdle, don't look, just—there's a cabinet with passports and money. There is at least one meant for you. Don't travel with cash. Put it into your bank account. You're not a fugitive, there's no reason for you to become one. Take the car, get yourself to an airport. Easy as that.'

Much of Abigail's face is taken up by dread and panic. But in her eyes, there is a glint of steel.

'Where would I go?'

'I don't know. You speak any languages?'

'I took a year of Italian.'

'There you go. Enough to order a meal. I'm sure they speak some English in Rome. Or try Milan for shopping.' A memory flickers in Will's mind, a caving pit of painful warmth. 'Or Florence. They do good pistachio ice-cream.'

The plastic chair whines. Hannibal's eyebrows knit at the sound, then smooth out again. Abigail goes to stand by the window, shuttered to let him sleep. The light that has sneaked its way in disperses in her hair, painting a halo.

She is deciding. Will thinks he knows which way the verdict will go, and he doesn't want to watch it happen. He studies instead Hannibal, who is labouring his way through another dream, drifting high on the aftereffects of anaesthesia as Will adds to his list of betrayals. Can he forgive Will this one?

'Okay.'

She doesn't turn and neither does Will. He takes Hannibal's hand in his.

'What do I do with the car?' Her voice is matter-of-fact. Her throat is tight from trying not to cry.

'Just ditch it at the airport,' Will says. 'I'll find it later.'

A poor plan—Will is not sure he can actually keep track in his mind of all the cars he's been leaving across the state. He wants this conversation over too badly to waste time hashing out an alternative.

'I'll send you a postcard,' she says. 'Tell you if the ice-cream is any good.'

Will doesn't believe her. He still smiles, because she has turned to look at him for what he imagines will be the last time, and the least he can do is pretend. 'Yeah. Thank you.'

There is another torturous moment as she gathers her things. They don't speak. Will picks up her jacket for her from the back of the chair. When she takes it from him, she says the final thing she will say to him,

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' Will says and it's a lie. 'Go.'

She hesitates at the door. For a stupid flash of hope, he imagines she might hug him.

She brushes past Will to lean over Hannibal's sleeping form. She looks as though she might whisper to him a goodbye or even plant a kiss on his forehead, but whether she goes through with either Will does not know. Her long hair shields them from his intrusion.

Will expects to cry after she has left. He doesn't. He has not cried once since Tobias Budge aimed a gun at Hannibal's chest. To say he has always cried easily is untrue because he can't remember as much. He knows only that he has cried easily after he first split, and now that he is whole again he seems to have forgotten how. That, on its own, strikes him as something he might grieve for if he could.

That night, Jack ambushes Will in the restroom.

'Brought you another shirt,' he says in lieu of hello. 'A book, too. You been taking all your meds, Will?'

Will takes the bag. The inside of it crinkles. Alana brought clothes a few hours ago, so he doesn't need the shirt; but this shirt isn't a baggy spare, Jack went into a store and bought this

shirt for Will specifically—there is a care in providing clothes that Will does not wish to scorn.

‘I’m off meds,’ he says, which is a lie. They *are* supposed to try and wean him off the anti-seizure stuff soon: he sees no issue with getting a head start. ‘What’s the book?’

The book is a rosy paperback looking to be aimed at an audience that is decidedly *not* Will. Jack is too busy checking the stalls to appear embarrassed.

‘Something to get your mind off things,’ he grumbles. Will amuses himself with the image of Jack Crawford barging into Barnes & Noble and demanding a book that’s gay and not about murder. The smile fades from his lips when Jack, having found no lock, leans his back against the exit door.

‘This is where you want to talk?’

‘Doctor Lecter’s awake,’ Jack says. ‘I got what I wanted from him for now. I don’t want to disturb him.’

‘Fine.’ Will presses the book into his chest, tightening his fingers on the spine as though it were a shield. ‘I’ve told you everything already.’

‘I don’t think you have. We had a chat with Franklyn Froideveaux. He claims he got a phone call from Doctor Lecter’s number the day of the attack, warning him to stay away from Budge. He says it wasn’t Doctor Lecter’s voice on the other end of the line.’

Will looks at the floor, trying to get a grip on shame. ‘I met Budge at a gallery opening,’ he admits. ‘Then Hannibal mentioned something about him—I think he knew there was something off. When Beverly brought that file with pictures from the concert hall, I knew.’

‘You didn’t say so to Katz. You didn’t say so to anyone—’

‘I wasn’t sure! Look, I can’t—when I say I know, I don’t actually know. I don’t ever actually know anything, Jack. I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it if it turned out I was fucking delusional, did I?’

‘So you called Froideveaux to warn him.’

Will swallows. ‘I had to do something,’ he says in a small voice. ‘I was afraid. That’s why Budge came, wasn’t it? Because of the phone call?’

Jack’s silence is heavy. ‘That’s what we think.’

Will blinks fast. Then, to drive the point home, he whispers, ‘Don’t tell Hannibal.’

Jack hesitates. He places a hand on Will’s shoulder, just for a second, before thinking better of it.

‘I won’t for now,’ he promises. ‘But we’re gonna have more questions for him once he’s feeling a little better. There are still some parts of this story I’m a little hazy on.’

‘Ask me the questions.’

‘Will, I’ve asked a lot of you already. These questions you don’t have the answers to.’

‘Yes, I do.’

The confidence in Will’s voice gives Jack pause. He looks as though he is wondering whether or not he has the time to humour him.

‘I was so terrified after I saw those crime scene photos, I couldn’t sleep,’ Will reveals. ‘I couldn’t find my way back to myself. I fucked up when I called Franklyn. I can’t do what I used to do, Jack. I know that and you know that.’ He forces himself to meet his eye, just about. ‘But I knew Tobias Budge killed that cello player from the photograph alone. I knew you didn’t believe the story I gave you—*you’re not under suspicion*, shit, like I wasn’t under suspicion when you found Nick Boyle’s body? You went through Hannibal’s phone. You went through mine. You spent an hour raking Abigail over the coals just to see if something would slip. I might not be able to read a clock anymore, but I am still Will Graham. And I’ve been living with Hannibal Lecter nearly half a year now. You want a profile. How about you ask the profiler?’

Ever so slowly, Jack Crawford’s mouth stretches in a smile.

‘Alright, Will Graham,’ he says. ‘Hit me.’

Will allows his gaze to float to the place behind Jack, where the wall meets the ceiling. It is just as good a point as any to focus on as he begins, in an even voice, to deliver the first lecture he has given since the end of another life.

‘Hannibal Lecter shows common long-term effects of childhood trauma: extreme emotional detachment from the characters and settings of childhood, a compulsion to repeat and revise early experiences, obsessive concerns around food scarcity and eating, a predilection for emotional isolation and high-risk behaviour. He is a perfectionist and egotist fixated on all the pathological ways in which others relate to the world, because he wants to sample and internalize those ways to connect with the world himself. First Randall Tier, now Tobias Budge. It’s a pattern. And let’s not forget,’ he gestures at his own chest, ‘who it is he’s chosen to bring home. He probably suspected something was off with Budge for weeks, but he is curious and he is possessive. If you dug deeper into his patient history, I bet you’d find more fledgling sociopaths: he is drawn to these people and he is unlikely to let anyone intervene until it is too late. And they are drawn to him.’

Will stops for a breath. He finds that, by no conscious choice, it turns into a laugh.

‘I mean, you know what he’s like. Obsessed with every dark corner of the psyche. Big on self-expression. Non-judgemental. These people yearn for understanding and he has understanding to give. Of course they come to him like fruit flies to honey.’

His throat has gone dry. When he tries to swallow, he finds saliva lacking. He must be dehydrated—he never remembers to drink water unless Hannibal puts a glass in his hand.

‘Well.’ Jack smooths down his shirt. ‘You sure got a job if you ever want it again.’

Will gives a painful chuckle. ‘No, thanks.’

He moves to pass, the path now cleared by Jack’s sidestep, but a hand on his chest prevents him.

‘One last thing,’ says Jack. ‘You’re right—we did follow up on some of your story. Standard procedure. Someone called to check if anyone saw you pick up Abigail Hobbs from her ward that night. They did. What they didn’t see was Abigail Hobbs. Not since then.’

‘Hasn’t been very long.’

‘No.’

‘Anyway, Abigail’s not a suspect, is she? I mean, in your head, sure. Not in any official capacity.’

A minute wince seizes Jack’s features. ‘Are you trying to tell me something, Will?’

Will considers it. ‘I’m trying to strike a deal,’ he decides.

Jack’s eyebrow rides up. ‘A deal?’

‘I told you I wasn’t coming back. I’m not. But this is the deal: you leave Abigail Hobbs alone—you don’t try to find out where she is, you don’t try and track her phone or card, you drop her file deep into a dusty drawer and don’t pull it out unless she is actually found guilty of something—and one day, I’ll give you the Ripper.’

‘You’ll give me the Ripper?’

‘If the Ripper’s ever caught, who’s going to catch him? You have another name in mind except mine?’

Jack glares at him, grim. ‘You know I don’t.’

‘I know you don’t,’ Will echoes. ‘So that’s the deal. I don’t work for you unless it’s a Ripper scene. Leave Abigail be and I will look at all the Ripper files you want me to, free of charge. And who knows?’ Will smirks. ‘Maybe I am the chosen one.’

And so, though he might not have tied up all his loose ends into a neat bow, haphazardly or not they’ve been tied up alright. There remains one only that Will doesn’t have the first idea where to put: the Hannibal that he takes home two days later.

He hasn’t seen him like this before. He’s never thought to imagine him this way. The Hannibal who lies down obediently on his old mattress in the empty guest bedroom is quiet. He is disinterested. He is too weak for true fear and he is too awake for dreamt terror. Will has succeeded in driving him into proper madness at last, the madness that comes from realizing you are mad, from seeing finally that the world in which you dwell and the world inhabited by others barely intersect. Will knows what this illness feels like: it dulls and it

sharpens, it turns food into ash in your mouth and it makes you wish only for the relief of a drugged sleep.

Will struggles to remember ever liking anything as much as he likes *this*.

'You want some of mine?'

Hannibal has finished his omelette and laid the knife and fork neatly pointing to five o'clock. The plate sits in his lap, nestled between the blue sheets Will got out for him.

'No, thank you.'

So formal. He isn't hungry, Will can tell—he is only playing at it, forcing the nutrition into his body on principle.

'Drink some water, Hannibal.'

Hannibal drinks the water in small, pained sips. Will could tell him that his memory has not actually deserted him. He could tell him Will has deleted the texts from the Other off his phone in fear of Jack finding them. He could tell him Tobias Budge lies dead in their garden, that Randall Tier died at Will's hand, that Will has betrayed him. What is he afraid of? That Hannibal will not accept it? So what if he doesn't? Will can keep him here until he does. It is not as though Hannibal could go anywhere if he wanted to.

'Where are your pyjamas?'

'I don't remember.'

'That's my line, Hannibal.'

Hannibal says nothing. His gaze is distant. The bathroom is steamed up from the shower, but his naked skin is erupting in goosebumps.

Will pulls out a set from the laundry basket. It has no obvious stains on it, so it's probably fine. He's going to sweat through it within the night anyway.

Hannibal puts on the shirt himself, but Will has to help him with the pants. The fabric slides over one ankle, pale and trembling, and the other, veined purple and swollen with bruise. Hannibal makes no sound when Will's fingers skirt over the place it hurts, but his hands twitch ever so slightly on the seat of the wicker chair. His nails leave crescent imprints in the towel Will has laid out for him to catch the last drops of wet.

Is this what Will is afraid of—understanding? Knowing at last the appeal this once held for Hannibal? He could find ways to keep him like this forever. For the first time, Will can truly see him. If they see you, they can hurt you: Will could carve a hole into Hannibal's other knee if he so pleased, he could enchant him with another tale only to reveal it a lie, he could break him again and over each time Hannibal threatened to learn how to walk again. If he wished to, he could remain forever Hannibal's only recourse in the world.

They lie together in the dark, pushed too close and too hot. Hannibal's breathing is too careful, too soft, too lucid. Will is sure he won't sleep until Hannibal sleeps. He is sure he won't sleep until he has told him the truth. He thought—he thought it would be over now, that Hannibal would see for himself through every deception and judge Will for what he had done. He thought all his lies would spill from him the moment he felt Hannibal's eyes on him again. Why can't it be easy for once?

'I don't know what I'm going to do,' is all that comes out when Will tries to speak, and he tries again, failing every time, pressing sobbing kisses into the heat of Hannibal's neck. Maybe he never tells him. Maybe Hannibal dies in his sleep tonight and it is Will's fault. Maybe they live broken and hurt forever.

This is what Will is afraid of: Hannibal wanted both Wills, but all he can think of now is the Will who is not here. He lies in their house with Will in his arms, thinking only of the mirage that wants nothing from him, that can be dreamt but not held.

Finally, Will can give him the two Wills, bunched up into one. What if that still isn't enough?

At one point, Hannibal slips out of bed and disappears into the bowels of the house. The darkness swallows him, the house swallows him, the world swallows. Will lies alone, afraid that Hannibal will never re-emerge, that he will make himself a home in the woods, that come morning he will have revealed himself a story made up by Will's solitude and fevered brain.

When Will's body can no longer support the sum of his fears, he gets out of bed and goes to look for him.

Verifying the bathroom empty, an instinct leads Will to the master bedroom. He stifles a cough into his arm as dust rises from a disturbed box. The burner phone rests concealed under the Chesapeake Ripper files. This has been its rightful place since the start, so that every time Will reached for it or laid it to rest, he would have to remember.

Will is better now. There is little risk of him forgetting.

The phone shows one missed call. It shows one new message.

Please

Will takes a breath.

What are you asking for, Hannibal?

I need to see you. Please.

Will knows as much. But he can't show himself—that would make it real. Telling the story makes it real. Letting Hannibal see his face would mean admitting something Will knows it true but cannot say. Better to get him back to bed. Better to make it so he has nowhere to go but back to Will's bed, better to lie trapped in his own body beside him and exercise the

power to judge and care—better that than to afford that same power to Hannibal, and to bare his chest for the knife.

After everything, you still want to see me?

Yes. Please.

This isn't a fairy-tale, Hannibal. You come find me, he's gone. You can't have both. Do you understand that? He won't be there if you come back

I understand.

The smell of conifers is too frail here, overwhelmed by old wood and cardboard. How much more potent it would be in the woods, where Will allowed himself to first be possessed—to first pretend he was possessed—to be born and walk—God. It is all too complicated in the house, the fears knotted and awful in Will's lungs. In the woods, the world is simple.

Maybe the courage he lacks can be found in that possession, in the depth of dark and earth. Maybe they are both possessed and will walk into the woods to never emerge again.

Midnight, the woods behind the house, he decides before he can change his mind. *Say goodbye—And come.*

Will does not intend for Hannibal to venture in deep. A dozen feet will do; his legs can hardly carry him further. The canopy is already summer-thick and will hide the house from sight well enough, which is all Will needs.

He waits, sat up on the mattress, dark stabbing at his eyes, for Hannibal to come say goodbye. He will follow down after him then, to watch him struggle with the distance. Or perhaps—Will doesn't dare believe it, but he wants to believe, desperately—maybe just seeing him in the doorway again will loosen Will's tongue, maybe he will pull him down right here and tell him the truth, or else learn in his heart he can live without telling.

Hannibal never comes up to say goodbye.

The feeling crawls up the mattress like the shadowy fingers that once stalked Will's nights at the hospital. It rushes up limbs with the blood that thuds into his ears. There is no hand over his shoulder, there is no loss of self when the drop comes—but the rage, oh, the rage is just the same as it has always been.

Will dresses. He goes downstairs, puts on his shoes, and gets the rifle.

Will does not have Hannibal's sense of smell, but he has his eyes and he has the pull in his stomach. They lead him across the lawn and into the depth of pathless wood, past footprints in the wet earth and the circles that the points of Hannibal's crutches have driven into moss. The light of the round moon is bright enough to reveal Will's world to him. He finds the place Hannibal has fallen and raised himself again. He finds the crutch he's abandoned in a bush. His ears pick up every creak, every whisper of wind in the forest, waiting for one of them to announce itself his prey. When it does, Will does not pursue immediately—he prefers

to walk ahead of him, to circle him without Hannibal knowing, to peer at him through trees and find his own feet falling ever so softly on the ground as he runs, life and strength flowing through him that do not feel Will's own, that strike him as something ancient and primal he has merely borrowed for the glory of his hunt.

It is one thing to chase and capture. It is another to wait, the clearing gleaming with moonlight like the silver surface of a still water, for the prey to come to you.

Do you need anything, Will, Hannibal once asked him. Another moonlit night, Hannibal's body laid out before him just like so, conscious then and fallen with exhaustion and illness now. Will remembers that night so well, the way the question rang in his ears in ready response to the need that had risen in him.

Now, Hannibal is a feverish warmth beneath him, solid and real, gasping and hazed. Blood thrums in his throat, desperate beneath the weight of Will's hand. Will needs again, he has needed for so long, but this one is a greater need—a need repressed, a need that cannot be spoken, a need that cried itself into Hannibal's skin and waited for Hannibal in bed, the need that Hannibal has refused, the need he has scorned—

'Is this what you want from me?' Will demands, rough-voiced, doubled over with pain. The rifle is forgotten; if Will is going to punish him for this slight, it will be with hands and teeth like the monster that he is, like the monster Hannibal wants. 'Is this what you want, Hannibal?'

The answer is yes, but that is not truly the question Will is asking. He wants to know a greater, more horrifying truth: is this *all* you want from me? This cycle of hurt and care, of pain and relief, of inevitable endings and looming catastrophe—is this all you're willing to give me in turn? Is this all we can give each other?

Hannibal shivers beneath him. His eyes are blurring over from suffocation.

Will loosens the hold on his throat. With that slip of oxygen, Hannibal manages to meet his eye. His gaze is sharper than Will expected; in its surprise, it cuts.

'Is this what you want?' he wheezes out.

This one, at least, Will knows the answer to.

God, no.

And just as the silent admission cuts into Will's agonized fury, Hannibal loses it.

It isn't unlike the loss of self that came over him when Tobias Budge invaded their home. It terrifies Will to see it directed at himself, to glimpse this shadow that comes over Hannibal's face, this sickly desperation, and he pins his wrists to the ground to stop him from whatever madness he is contemplating—his phone blares light into Will's eyes, blinding him momentarily before his pupils adjust.

In this light, both their faces stand our stark and clear.

In this light, they see each other.

‘Will,’ Hannibal exhales.

Will lets go of his wrists.

He takes a breath. Hannibal does not blink, not once, only stares. He sees him.

‘Will.’

And Will feels himself sag. If they see you, they can hurt you—his chest is bared and the knife is braced, and there is nothing for it now.

‘You need to get back in bed,’ he tells Hannibal.

‘Anything—anything you want—’

‘That is exactly what I want. Come on.’

Hannibal’s legs fold and refold beneath him. He seems to barely realize as much, busy repeating Will’s name over and over like a reverent mantra. Will pulls one of Hannibal’s arms around his shoulder and angles him to take off some of the weight. It becomes clear after a mere few steps there is no way they can make it home.

‘I thought you’d never make it past a dozen feet,’ Will mutters to himself. ‘Shows how much I know. Alright. I think we can make it to the road—that’s the clearing we saw before, isn’t it, a few weeks ago? That time we drove?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘We’re in the wrong forest, Will. Do you not see?’

Will twists his head under the leaden weight of Hannibal’s arm to sneak a look. His face is a tribute to wonder. ‘You’re not going to be much help, are you?’

‘I’ve healed the split,’ Hannibal whispers. ‘It worked.’

‘You didn’t heal the split, Hannibal,’ Will sighs. ‘If anything, I healed the split.’

‘Of course, Will,’ says Hannibal smugly.

‘Don’t *placate* me. First of all, there was no split to heal—’

They trip—teether. Will hopes the road is the direction he believes it to be. It does seem as though the woods aren’t the same as the woods they visited in daylight. If they take a wrong turn, they might pass by the road and enter instead deeper into the night, into the place reason strikes laughable and the impossible takes on allure. The temperature is mild, but Will can smell snow.

‘Is this the same way?’ Hannibal asks suddenly.

‘What?’ Will wheezes. He’s not sure how much longer he can support them both. Hannibal has one of his crutches still, but half the time it’s as though he’s forgotten what it’s for.

‘Is this the way you led me out of the woods the first time? When I was a child? Yes—the castle is there, I think—’

‘It’s—sure.’

‘Tell me the story.’

‘Fine. I talk, you walk. That’s the deal.’

Hannibal nods, a grin stretching his lips. He gazes down purposefully, to watch his feet and correct for errors.

‘It was night. Snow piled up high in the, uh, the land where snow never melts, and everywhere else to match. It was the sort of night when an empty stomach meant you’d soon be frozen stiff, waiting for a yellow-eyed beast to come and feast on your failure. The Other Will stalked—’

Hannibal stops.

‘Fine. *I* stalked one of those beasts.’

Hannibal resumes walking.

‘It was warm and full from feasting on human flesh, but I was tiring it down. The longer we ran, the more I could hear its steps falter. It fell, it dragged, it shivered in the cold. I nearly caught up to it a few times, but it always just escaped my grasp. Big step now over the log.’

An owl hoots in a tree somewhere. Hannibal is running high on adrenaline, but at one point the morphine and the blood loss will catch up to him. What is Will going to do if he collapses? Will he stay with him until he wakes? Light a fire, find a bush of early berries or the hiding place of a wild mushroom? Hannibal might like to wake to such a sight, but for Will this would be too great a risk: he might be tempted to stay forever.

‘Finally, it collapsed on the forest floor, made too weak by how long I’d kept up the chase. My claws tightened on flesh—but it wasn’t the black skin of beast that I expected. It was soft and blushed with cold. It was the same boy who’d wanted me to get him a bear for a pet that time.’

Hannibal chuckles. He is putting all his effort into taking step after step, but the rest of his body is succumbing fast to the relaxation of muscle that morphine commands. Will has to clutch him close, hip to hip and chest to chest, to stop him slipping from his embrace.

‘You walked with him,’ Hannibal says, half-gurgle, half-susurration. ‘You watched him from behind the treeline as he rose and fell again—’

‘No,’ Will says firmly. ‘I told you he was exhausted. I wrapped him up in my bear skin and I carried him.’

Hannibal frowns. ‘I don’t remember that.’

‘You wouldn’t, you were tiny. Who’s telling the story?’

‘You, Will.’

‘Damn right.’ Will angles his body so he may take more weight off Hannibal’s injured side, grunting under the strain. ‘For a little boy he was surprisingly heavy, too. Must have been all that ego.’

The first time Will’s foot falls upon concrete, it nearly startles him into dropping to his knees. They will not dwell forever in the woods nor will they die there: the black road stretches in both directions, unlit and constant, and on either end there is a place they might eat and sleep. All roads lead to Rome, don’t they?

‘Right,’ Hannibal says.

‘Huh?’

‘Turn right. Our neighbour’s house is maybe half a mile past that sign.’

Any sense of reality has switched off in Hannibal’s brain, but navigation skills at least remain. Between them both, they are halfway to fully functional.

They walk, shadows bracketing them on either side. It is easier with the steady support of the asphalt, and it is more dreadful—if they stumble and fall, they will cut their faces on the unforgiving rough.

‘I carried the boy out of the woods,’ Will picks up the story. ‘Past the boundary I could never cross and into the real. And then there we were. Hannibal—walk.’

Hannibal is sagging where he stands. Will tries to infuse his voice with authority, but it comes out more like pleading.

‘Walk, Hannibal.’

‘I love you,’ Hannibal says reverently. ‘I love you, Will.’

‘Yeah? When you wake up sore and sane tomorrow morning, you’ll sing a different tune. Walk.’

That last stretch of distance, with Mr Parr’s house the beacon on Will’s horizon, he drags Hannibal more than anything else. He carries him past the open gate, up the porch steps, he bangs on the door as though he is seeking respite from a raging storm. A light deep in the loins of the house comes on; a dog barks.

Mr Parr has aged since Will saw him last, gone further into the rugged old of men who have worked their lives in the sun and in the rain. His dog ambles under his feet, throwing barks and huffs at the intruders. Mr Parr has always been kind to the dog—that is the sum of what Will remembers about him from the life before this.

'Kid,' he greets them. 'What the hell's wrong with this one?'

'He just got out of the hospital. Surgery. I found him in the woods—I think the drugs made him sleepwalk.'

At this, Hannibal rouses himself. 'No,' he counters, sounding a little offended.

'Yes,' Will stresses.

Hannibal seems to consider this. 'Yes,' he agrees finally. 'An uncommon side-effect. Morphine typically causes confusion, headaches, constipation, vertigo, rashes, urinary incontinence, nausea—'

'There you go,' Will interjects. 'Could you drive us home?'

Mr Parr helps Will heft Hannibal onto the backseat of his truck. The upholstery releases a whiff of wet dog smell and a flutter of dust. The green knitted blanket that covers the seats itches where Will adjusts it. It is testament to Hannibal's state of mind that he makes nary a wince over the whole ordeal, and when Will settles in the back with him, cradling his injured leg in his lap, he beams only and leans his head against the window pane, to better settle in for watching Will's face.

'A shame, in a way,' he muses, syllables blurring together, 'that I'll never see your Otherness anthropomorphized, Will. But I did feel his hand. He placed it on my shoulder before he mauled the intruder for threatening that which belongs to him.'

Will stiffens. Hannibal is speaking softly and Mr Parr appears disinterested, but this is decidedly a conversation he would prefer to save until morning.

'You did that,' he says. 'Not me.'

Hannibal's eyes widen. 'Of course. You have opened your body to house him and I had to do the same. A perfect recreation of the moment of divide, a paying back of dues—I was to be open to intrusion, struck down and helpless, to recover in fear and in yearning for your hand—and we emerge from the woods again. Has a new deal been struck?'

'God,' comes Mr Parr's voice from the driver's seat. 'He ever shut up?'

Will can't help the smile. 'Rarely,' he says. He fixes his eyes on Hannibal's ankle, kept secure between Will's hands from the jostle of the truck. 'You are surprisingly eloquent for how high you are.'

'I am not high, Will,' Hannibal huffs. 'I am in awe.'

His awe does little to stop Hannibal losing all control of his limbs the moment he is deposited back on his mattress. The house is as they left it, dark but known. It is a strange thing to be here again, to know they will wake here tomorrow morning and be returned to life and the world. The dogs mill around them awhile, disconcerted and sleepy, before deciding all is well and retreating back downstairs. Will gives Hannibal water to drink and changes his bandages but forgoes anything else. He ignores the pyjamas, dark with dirt, he peels off only his own pants and boots and climbs in with Hannibal, exhaustion descending upon him as suddenly as the onset of fever.

The last thing he sees before sleep claims him are Hannibal's eyes, blinking blearily in time with breath.

'You're still here,' Hannibal whispers in wonder, as though even for him that is one miracle too many.

Chapter End Notes

He's not high, Will. He is *in awe*.
Also, bonus points for anyone who spots the *Matrix* reference.

The end is in sight now! The next chapter is the last "real" chapter. After that, we're getting a little interlude from Abigail's point of view, and then the epilogue.

Thank you to everyone still reading!

The Lighthouse

Chapter Summary

A difficult morning after.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-One: The Lighthouse.

To the sound of whines and wagging tongues, Will wakes into fresh hell.

His eyes have formed a crust so hard it is less sand and more rock. It won't be cracked, and he must use his own spit to soften it enough to make slits through which he can see. His feet, sticking out from under the duvet, are slathered with the saliva of at least four different dogs; so is his hair.

They were cold with shock and tiredness when they returned, so Will closed every window and brought in every blanket; now, the room has swollen with a heat that stops breath short. His head is pounding, his mouth tastes like phantom vomit and like too long of a sleep, his clothes stick to him with sweat and urine. Hannibal must have rolled over in the night in some latent instinct to suffocate Will in retribution, because he is halfway over his chest, thigh heavy atop Will's legs, which have grown so numb he doesn't think he can move.

'Urgh,' he says. 'God. Are you alive?'

Something cracks in Hannibal's back as he makes to rise off Will, holding himself up on his forearms. He has Will's collarbone printed on his cheek. His eyes are so puffy he looks halfway to anaphylactic.

'Barely,' he harks. His voice makes very little sound but very much air.

'Whose piss is that? I can't even tell. I thought it was you and your morphine, but then my head hurts like an asshole.'

'You haven't had a seizure in months.'

'I stopped taking the drugs a few days ago.'

'Very wise,' Hannibal deadpans. 'If you were so set on experimenting, you might have at least put a protector pad on the mattress.'

'You don't get to act superior over this. It might be your piss.'

With what appears a herculean effort, Hannibal slides a little further down the mattress, feeling at the sheets.

‘You’re not going to—God, fine. I’ll take possession of the piss. You don’t have to smell it to make your point.’

Hannibal falls back on the pillows. ‘Thank you.’

‘How’s your knee?’

‘I invite you to take a guess.’

There is no escaping it then: Will is going to have to move. His whole body rebels at the thought. When he manages to sit up, the world sways and thickens. ‘I’ll get your pills,’ he says through a nauseating yawn. ‘Stay put.’

He escapes a fall down the stairs only by virtue of having anticipated trouble and already holding onto the railing with both hands. His back, his shoulders, his neck and thighs all burn, renounce, groan. Chip is already scratching at the front door, having sprinted ahead of Will to best broadcast the urgency of his request. Will lets the dogs out, changes into a new pair of sweats, then goes into the kitchen to swallow down some ibuprofen and brew one hell of a coffee.

The oddity of how normal everything appears grows in him as he waits for the water to steam. The hiss of the pot sounds much the same as it does on any morning. Betty and Lana have ambled back inside to trail Will in the kitchen, heads turned up in perfect attention. Everything has changed yet nothing shows; Will doesn’t know what to do in the wake of this change and defaults to routine instead. It feels like too much has passed between them now, like what has happened is too monumental to be touched—he imagines with apprehension a string of days like this one, a false pretence of normalcy where neither of them can figure out where to go from here.

The coffee comes out black as sin. Will pours it into a large mug for them both to share and snags a banana off the counter to give Hannibal’s stomach some lining for the drugs. Even as he makes his way up the stairs, he dreads the moment he reaches the top.

He finds the room draughty and marginally less stunk up with illness. Hannibal has removed the sheets off the bed and sits in fresh pyjamas under a blanket. His efforts are impressive, though they obscure the truth: for how much he cares for cleanliness, he has not braved the shower.

Will sits down next to him. He doesn’t know what to say, so says nothing. He breaks the banana in two and gives Hannibal the bigger part. He gives him the coffee to help wash down the pills. For a while, they sit in silence, chewing small bites of the fruit, passing between them the coffee mug after every other sip.

Gradually, the drugs and coffee and calories start pushing at the fog in Will’s brain. Hannibal’s eyes, too, are becoming clearer, and Will soon finds them fixing on his face, flicking there and back to take in this or that detail of expression. The hyper-focus of this

silent attention makes him squirm. He hopes he's not going to find later a sketch to the tune of, *Study of Man Tiredly Eating Banana.*

When the coffee is gone and the banana is peel only, the quiet becomes unbearable. Will clears his throat, gaze fixed on Hannibal's hands folded primly atop the blanket.

'What are you thinking?' Will asks.

'I'm thinking that I was right.'

'Right about what?'

'Everything.'

'Oh,' Will says bitterly. 'Good for you.'

Again, there is silence. Will hates it more for how comfortable Hannibal seems with it, satisfied to look at Will and little else. He wants to slash through that comfort.

'I called Franklyn to warn him off Budge.'

'I know, Will.'

'I killed Randall when you left me to do therapy. That's why I told you I'd stay for group that day.'

'Yes.'

'Randall was supposed to help me kill Sutcliffe and frame you for it. It got out of hand.'

'Yes,' Hannibal hums again, now amused. 'It did a little.'

'I destroyed your kitchen after I went down to the basement. I think. I don't remember that one so well.'

'I see. How did you know to go down to the basement?'

Will shrugs. 'I figured you out before the hospital. You ever wonder why I cancelled our session?'

Hannibal hesitates. 'I've forgotten about it.'

'That's my line.'

'Will you look at me?'

Will wants to. He swallows. 'Maybe later.'

Hannibal makes no show of insistence. He unfolds his hands and, tentative, reaches out to grasp Will's. The touch reminds him he is nauseous. He closes his eyes and breathes through it.

‘I never considered you two might be sharing a body,’ Hannibal says calmly. ‘What you implied last night sounded very much like possession. It makes sense, of course. It must have been upsetting to be constantly fighting for room.’

Will snorts. ‘I got a lot of room.’

‘I know. And now that you’ve learned to share, I don’t think you realize how much—’ Hannibal hesitates, as if searching for a word that will do his judgement justice. ‘There is this new depth to your eyes—it’s wholly beautiful. I have never seen anything like it.’

‘Don’t do that,’ Will tells him sharply. ‘We’re being honest, so let’s be honest. No stories, no possession, no faerie kings or hunters carrying children off to safety. It was me all along, I couldn’t make up my mind, I lied to you. You were an idiot. There.’

Hannibal thinks about it. ‘Up to interpretation,’ he decides.

The indignation is what makes Will finally look up to his face. ‘It’s not—you know whose interpretation tends to work best? The guy’s who’s got all the facts.’

At this, Hannibal appears honest-to-God offended. ‘I might have facts that you don’t.’

‘Yeah? And what facts are those?’

‘That I remember you leading me out of the woods,’ Hannibal says firmly, eyes resolute on Will’s. ‘That I knew the part of you that is story long before I knew the part that is real. That I felt you take possession of my body when I killed Tobias Budge. That the divide between ourselves, the stories and the faerie kings we hold, and the world around, real and palpable, is not so great after all—that we are indissolubly connected, and that with your empathy you are uniquely predisposed to understanding that connection better than most. And the caverns that are threaded through you, the splits in the land of Will Graham that you see as void, those are only the world, real and other, weaving itself through you like ivy.’

By the time he is done, his voice has lost the initial firmness of conviction and become devout. His lips are parted, his gaze long, as though he is looking past the bodily confines of Will’s soul and down the depth of the darkest of his caverns.

In this moment, Will sees him.

When he does, he realizes that this is the kind of crazy you don’t talk somebody out of. This kind’s terminal.

‘Okay,’ he says weakly, feeling at once small and limitless under the weight of Hannibal’s gaze. ‘Sure. Up to interpretation. Agree to disagree.’

Hannibal blinks away some of his cosmic solemnity. ‘I don’t see why you’re so set on deromanticizing this experience, Will.’

It is then that Will finds he finally wants to kiss him again. Not enough of the oddity has been cleared away for him to go through with it, but merely reclaiming the desire is victory

enough. ‘Let’s, uh, let’s save the romance for after you’ve showered,’ he says, hoping to redirect his attention.

Hannibal frowns. ‘I apologize for neglecting personal hygiene after you got me shot, drugged me and proceeded to take me hiking across half the state.’

‘Drug you? I didn’t—’

‘You gave me entirely too much morphine. It would have brought down a horse.’

Will gave him exactly the required dosage, but it isn’t as though he is surprised that Hannibal is proving a difficult patient.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, failing to hide amusement. ‘For drugging you and for the shower comment. It wasn’t very funny.’

Hannibal gives him a nod of acknowledgment. Despite the put-on irritation, he continues to rub gentle circles into Will’s hands. The sensation has pushed right through ticklish and feels only pleasant now.

Again, there is silence. They have had many silences between them, but this one seems to pause time. How are they meant to get through a day of this? They have nothing to do today except sit together.

Will feels as though they are suddenly strangers.

‘Have you spoken about any of this to Abigail?’ Hannibal asks. ‘She told me at the hospital that you knew—although she didn’t clarify what you knew, exactly.’

Oh. He hasn’t come clean on all of his betrayals quite yet.

‘She figured some of it out, I think,’ Will explains, bracing himself. ‘I needed her help.’

Hannibal looks at once pensive and grim. Will doesn’t like it. ‘I should speak with her, I think,’ he says, and Will immediately feels fully, for the first time, that he has made the right choice.

‘You can’t.’ He meets Hannibal’s eye. ‘I told her to go to Europe.’

Hannibal’s face relaxes into a perfect blank. The previous expression, as dark and dangerous as Will found it, was significantly less terrifying.

‘You told her to go to Europe.’

‘I told her the same thing I told Franklyn: to get the hell out of dodge. I told her to take the money and passports from your basement and to get as far away from us as she could.’

He challenges himself not to look away. Hannibal does instead.

‘I would like to be alone.’

The monotone of his voice strikes Will as eerie. What should be a display of human vulnerability renders him inhuman instead. Or perhaps it is more that there is a wall now between them, that Will has grown used to seeing Hannibal just a little more open, that this reservation feels like it does not belong in their house.

Will stands.

‘Okay,’ he says numbly. ‘Fine.’

He goes downstairs. He supposes he could use the time to take a shower, but Hannibal’s cold anger spills through the bedroom door, contaminating the whole of the second floor.

He pets the dogs. He brushes the knots out of Casper’s hair. He finds a recipe for pancakes, copies it down onto the back of an old receipt—a fine way to force his awareness through every step without losing focus—and sets out the tools and ingredients on the counter. He goes over the list twice. The chirping of birds out the window is like the sound of nails on wall; like chalk on concrete.

Upstairs, it is silent. The recipe calls for a blender but that would make it impossible for Will to hear if there is movement. It is stupid: he does not genuinely expect Hannibal to sneak up on him, bare feet on floor, hand on throat—but it is equally stupid that he doesn’t expect just that. He folds in the batter by hand.

He eats the first pancake plain, in between flipping. The frozen berries are thawing on the counter. He considers getting them on the stove and making syrup, but that would require more googling and copying, and Will cannot risk taking his mind off a hot pan.

Upstairs is still silent.

Around pancake number seven, Will’s disquiet resolves itself into an emotion he much prefers: anger.

He turns off the stove, sets the remaining batter into the fridge, and finds the knife. This same knife he once slipped into his mattress; then, after he brandished it at Budge, he retired it into the back of the drawer. It strikes him a funny sort of weapon now that he holds it. It’s dull as all hell, more likely to graze an angry red scrape into skin than to slice through muscle.

Still, the clatter it makes when Will lets it drop to the floor at his feet is good enough. It makes Hannibal startle from his repose—Will finds him lying flat on his back, arm thrown over the eyes and face blank as anything—and wince at the sight of Will looming in the doorway.

‘You want to know what the knife’s for?’

Hannibal sighs. ‘Not particularly.’

‘It’s a souvenir, for you. You know where I used to keep it? In my bed. I tore a hole in the bottom of the mattress and kept the knife in there in case you got bored of me. Or if you

decided I was too big a threat. Or God knows what. And you get pissed at me that I didn't want Abigail to sleep with a knife under her pillow?'

Hannibal struggles to sit up. His body language is a mute scream: a scream at Will to stop talking and leave the room. Will does not give a shit.

'*In the mattress* is hardly under the pillow.'

Will ignores him. 'She needs a chance to live her own life. This is better for her.'

Hannibal's eyes shoot up to meet his. 'Do not *dare* presume you know what is better for her,' he hisses. 'You have sent her away and bolted the door behind her. She is now fully alone in a world of wolves and sheep—and with no one to tell when she makes her choice of which to kill and which to become.'

'She is not *you,* Hannibal. It was *your* mother who sent you off with your basket full of cash and privilege, to go become a monster as far away from her as possible. Abigail's mother is dead, and you are keeping her basket nice and safe on a high shelf so she has no choice but to stay and live out your fantasy—'

'You have exiled Abigail to another continent. I don't see what's so difficult about exiling yourself to the kitchen.'

'I am saving her life!'

Will's chest is heaving. Hannibal swallows.

'You do not trust me with her,' he says plainly. 'Or is this punishment?'

'Of course I don't fucking trust you. How am I supposed to trust you with anything, Hannibal, after what you've done to me?'

Zoe has come to see what the ruckus is about. Hannibal sets her in his lap, where she paws at the blanket for a while to crease and tuck the sides into the perfect nest. There's a rigidity to the way Hannibal's hands stroke down her back, as though he'd just come in from a long walk in the cold.

Will wants him to say something. He wants him to offer an explanation so Will may refute it; he wants him to offer an apology that Will can decline. He wants him to argue that Will's hurt him, too, he wants a reason to show him just how much worse it can get.

Hannibal doesn't say anything. He opens his mouth once, a fraction and no more, then closes it again. He is careful to keep his gaze down on Zoe, to keep his shoulders relaxed in a submission to Will's anger. It is impossible to tell if he is genuine or only trying to stop further escalation.

A place deep in Will wakes into an ache, all at once, and this new pain threatens to double him over: he realizes he is at full strength and that he has in his reach a knife, and that there is a distinct possibility Hannibal's silence is nothing else but self-preservation.

‘It’s not punishment,’ Will says, feeling broken. ‘I don’t want us to be this violent quid pro quo, you hurt me and I hurt you. I don’t want to be even—I don’t want that to be all we are.’

Hannibal continues petting Zoe. At least he appears to be mulling over an answer rather than trying not to set Will off again. ‘I agree,’ he says after a while. ‘But I do like knowing we have come full circle and that in some way we are even. I think a part of you must like it, too, or else you wouldn’t have sought such particular reckoning in the first place.’

Like a boat at sea, Will feels himself pulled again with the tide, helpless against emotion. ‘We are *not* even,’ he seethes, fists curling, heart hammering outrage—he’s shaking again, fuck—‘We are nowhere near even. What I’ve done to you doesn’t come close to what you’ve done to me. If I shot you through the knee every night, every night if I made you sleep on a piss-soaked mattress, that would still not come close. If I taught Betty to piss on your bed once she’s too old to make it outside, if I had you suck me off in it and had you sleep covered in my cum after—that would not come close. Hell, half of that you’d probably like.’

There is a shade of pink now over Hannibal’s cheeks and the back of his neck. He has one hand careful on Zoe and the other fisted on the edge of the pillow, painful. ‘You are being unreasonably cruel,’ he says without looking up.

‘That’s what you want, isn’t it? You want the monster from the woods. Well, here I am.’

Hannibal takes a breath. ‘You know what I want, Will.’

Will closes his eyes in case Hannibal does look at him. ‘I know,’ he whispers. ‘And you’ve got it. Here I am. I thought it would be enough.’

Will hears Zoe turn and sniff. He hears Hannibal shift, too, as though he would like to stand up to join Will but struggles to decide.

‘I—apologize—if I said anything that suggested otherwise,’ he says stiffly.

Will kicks the knife out of the way and lets himself drop onto the mattress opposite Hannibal. He crosses his ankles tightly to edge as close as he dares, leaving mere inches of air between their bodies.

‘I’m stealing your dog,’ he tells him, reaching out to prise Zoe out of Hannibal’s lap and move her into his own.

‘You have six others to choose from.’

‘Yeah, but I want yours.’

The warmth of her on his thigh is solid. Simple. The warmth of Hannibal’s hand on his, trailing the path Will pets and scratches, is anything but.

‘Am I to be punished further, then?’ Hannibal asks conversationally, doing a fine job keeping the weariness from his voice—but not fine enough. ‘If you can be persuaded to let me in on your plan.’

‘I’m not great with plans.’

‘No.’

Will bites his lip. ‘No,’ he answers. ‘I don’t want that. Anyway, I’ve forgiven you.’

The motion of Hannibal’s hand halts briefly, messing up their synchrony. Will captures it and plants it on Zoe’s belly, then covers it with his own.

‘You say you have forgiven me,’ Hannibal says carefully, ‘but you don’t consider us to be even. What is more, you despise the idea nearly to a panic—why is it so important to you that my crimes against you remain greater than your crimes against me?’

Will shrugs, even though he suspects he knows exactly why.

‘Ah,’ Hannibal says.

Great. Shrugging is no use. Hannibal sees the whole of him now; there is nowhere left to hide.

‘Sounds like you’re going to tell me,’ Will mocks weakly.

‘It gives you power over me,’ Hannibal provides immediately. ‘I will no longer believe a show of helplessness or innocence, so you must find a new tool for manipulation. If there is an imbalance that I must make up to you, that means I can be manipulated into giving you what you want.’

A hot weight sits in Will’s throat, impossible to swallow around.

‘You don’t need to manipulate me into giving you what you want, Will.’

There’s a finger on his cheek, swiping away the tear.

‘What am I supposed to do instead? Ask?’ Will laughs. ‘As if.’

‘You could try.’

Will exhales. ‘Maybe later,’ he echoes, catching the edge of Hannibal’s smile.

‘How about I try to guess, for now?’

Their faces are inches away. Will leans in, eyes flicking to his lips—too dry; to his teeth—too sharp. ‘Sure.’

‘I think what you want, Will,’ Hannibal murmurs, a flutter of breath against the lobe of Will’s ear, ‘is your seizure medication.’

Will shoves him away.

‘And breakfast,’ Hannibal adds, smiling like the sun. ‘Something more substantial than a banana and hypertension.’

‘I made you pancakes, asshole,’ says Will, wiping his cheeks with his wrist for good measure. ‘And I’d stop the teasing. If you think I won’t fuck you into the bed just because you got yourself shot, think again.’

They shower together, holding each other up and soaping limbs with tentative touches. Hannibal’s body is mottled with bruises. Will feels its faint tremble when he helps Hannibal put on socks and slip into pants; he wants to ask him whether it is pain or emotion but fails to find the courage.

‘I’ll bring up the double mattress from the bed,’ he offers as he helps Hannibal to his feet.

‘You won’t be able to get it up the stairs on your own.’

‘With enough kicking and cursing, I will.’

Hannibal leans on him on the way out of the bathroom. Will’s brought him a second pair of crutches—they’d got ones for upstairs and downstairs—but he prefers to hobble around with Will as his sole support.

Does he prefer it? Or does he think Will might?

‘The mattress can wait,’ Hannibal says. ‘I’d like to eat on the porch.’

‘The whole point is to save you going up and down the stairs,’ Will reminds him.

‘The weather is nice.’

The bruises on him, so dark that some appear black, flash before Will’s eyes. ‘Okay,’ he says weakly.

Outside, sun kisses cheeks and crosshatches on bared necks. Chip, Casper and Lana are racing on the lawn, tongues out and tails wagging the excitements of a dewy spring day. Winston watches from the porch step, ears pricking at attention. Buster and Zoe are sniffing at the floor for pancake crumbs, bumping into each other in their focus, and Betty sleeps at Will’s feet, the lighter fur on her tummy tickling at his toes every time she draws in a breath. The acidity of the berries on Will’s tongue makes him wince. Above them, the sky hangs clear and jubilant.

‘If she hadn’t sent you away,’ Will says at the sky, ‘if you’d not been forced to leave home, you wouldn’t be here now.’

He has no need to look: he could tell when the stiffness sets upon Hannibal, when he pulls away from the moment and into himself, even if he’d been made deaf and blind.

‘That is true,’ says Hannibal tightly. Will wonders if there might come a day when he is able to say Abigail’s name again to him without fear. ‘Perhaps we can talk about something else.’

Will gives a nod. His neck feels like every tendon had turned into solid bone. He will have a headache by evening for sure.

‘I’ve been trying to fill in the gaps,’ Hannibal says carefully. ‘I imagine you have some of your own to fill.’

‘Not really.’

In the corner of his eye, he sees Hannibal smile. ‘Take mercy on my lack of omniscience, then,’ he says.

It is only right that Hannibal should have questions. But Will doesn’t think he can hear any more of them today. He feels wrung out already from their earlier conversation, his insides have been scratched raw, and there are no shouts and no tears left in him to spare. He pulls his feet up, careful not to disturb Betty, sets them on the edge of the bench, and prays that body language alone can convey to Hannibal the importance of letting this go.

‘Tomorrow,’ he mumbles. ‘Okay?’

Will can see no viable alternative: they must micro-dose on their hurts. A little bit today and a little bit tomorrow; it will take them the rest of their lives at this rate to get through them all. Does that mean every day will be like this? That every morning they will build up their pretence of routine and intimacy only to have the illusion dispel come night? Every day, Hannibal’s body bruised black and Will’s chest stuffed full of an ache that keeps him from swallowing. Can he take it?

‘What would you like to talk about?’ He sounds so unsure. Hannibal should never sound quite so unsure; they should never be quite so uncomfortable with silence. They were supposed to have pushed through this. An hour ago, they were as close to fine as Will could have hoped for. Was that an illusion, too?

Will hugs his knees closer to his chest. ‘Tell me a story,’ he asks, unable to think of a single real thing that would make this better.

Beneath Hannibal’s eyelids, Will can see the eyes moving, searching for a thread, an image, for one of their old tunes. After a moment, Will copies him. In the shallow dark stamped with the glows and scatters of insistent sunlight, he sees deep wells for falling into, caverns hiding bears, trees craning their hedgehog heads in the icy wind, and he sees the hunter that rules over snow and cold and pain. Here, at least, there is them: with everything real so disjointed and odd, at least when they close their eyes they can hope to see the same fictions.

‘There once was a fisherman who sailed the open seas in search of the best catch. He wanted only the most delicate flesh and only the sharpest-toothed mouths.’

Will turns to look at him, startled bodily for a reason he can’t initially name.

‘Even with the breeze, the weather was warm,’ Hannibal presses on, eyes still shut loosely, ‘and sweat pooled down his back when he heaved his catch into his boat. The sweat gathered at the bottom of the boat, where it mixed with blood. It stained the soles of his feet. Sometimes he thought that the whole of the sea was just his sweat, evaporated by the sun then fallen again with a break in weather.’

‘One time, he caught a shark so large its weight capsized the boat—but he tackled it in the water and slit its throat before it could get away. Another time, he caught an angel fish in the dead of night, when it mistook the black of sky for the ocean depths and swam too close to the surface. He wouldn’t have seen what he’d caught, it was so dark—if not for the lighthouse on the horizon. He saw the lighthouse no matter where he sailed and which way he looked. So, one day, in the height of summer when the fish were too lazy from heat to be caught, he decided at last to sail towards it.’

‘That’s—you’ve never told me that one before.’

‘No.’ Hannibal turns as though to meet Will’s eye. He looks only at his chin. ‘I can tell you another, if you’d prefer a more familiar story.’

Will almost says yes. ‘It’s fine, it’s just—different than usual.’

Hannibal’s hands fold in his lap—refold. ‘I thought we needed something different today. Something new.’

The skin just below the knee, where Will’s fingers dig in, burns. ‘Something Other,’ he jokes half-heartedly. ‘Okay. He went to the lighthouse.’

‘It rose on a pier so narrow that wherever he stood he could see the water either side. He climbed up steps carved into pointed rock, so hot from the sun that they sizzled where he treaded. White sand stuck to his heels and his toes. The door opened and inside there was dark wood and metal eaten through with rust. Sand had brushed fantastical shapes on the black floors. It smelled like the sea and like death—like no one had eaten or breathed in the lighthouse for decades.’

‘But—let me guess—there was a, what, a man-eating mermaid in the bathtub?’

Amusement creases Hannibal’s eyes. ‘No, I think,’ he hums, tugging his lips downward to contain the smile. ‘But there was a lighthouse keeper, just as dead and rusted as the rest of the house.’

‘I thought I was the lighthouse keeper.’

‘The *fisherman*,’ Hannibal corrects with a chastising look, ‘isn’t the lighthouse keeper. He was drawn to the pier because of the light from the lighthouse—pay attention, Will.’

Will lets his knees fall a little wider, the better to expose his chin and neck to the sun. It is too warm to pay attention.

‘Can the lighthouse keeper be a pirate, then?’ he puts forward. ‘With a wooden leg.’

‘A little on the nose. I might prefer the mermaid.’

The bruises on him. The ache in Will’s chest isn’t its own ache, really, it’s only a mirror of the knotted tissue and torn muscle that is Hannibal’s knee. And if he never walks properly again? How can Will breathe then?

‘Will. Focus.’

‘Yeah.’ His exhale is shaky. ‘Sorry.’

‘The fisherman tried to speak to the lighthouse keeper, but he didn’t hear or see him. He tried to open a window to let in fresh air, but the hinges were unoiled and they stuck. He tried to have a drink of water, but the tap was dead. He tried to exorcise the shadows lurking in the corners, but the light switch only clicked. There was no water, no electricity and no life.’

‘Where’s the light for the beacon coming from, then?

‘He wanted to know that, too. He went up the rusted stairway to check. What do you think he found?’

Will imagines how the perforated steel of the steps would feel on bare feet. He hears the clatter of the winding construction under the new weight. ‘A jellyfish,’ he says. ‘Bigger than a man’s head. It glowed a golden light and it was floating in the air, beating itself against the bars of the cage. He opened the cage and released it—it flew into the sky. Disappeared behind a golden-lined cloud.’

Hannibal gazes at him searchingly, body and features all poised in perfect attention. This attention is a thing to drown in, Will thinks—like the fisherman’s sea of blood and sweat.

‘On the way back down, he put his hand to the wall for balance,’ Will tells him more. ‘And he noticed that wherever he touched, there appeared a golden light, like that of the jellyfish. The light trailed after his hand, and he painted gilded, fast-fading pictures in the walls. And when his feet touched the wooden floor, he saw the same thing happen, his every step a new bloom of light.’

‘The house isn’t dead,’ Hannibal says. ‘It is asleep.’

Will smiles. ‘He is waking it up,’ he agrees. ‘And when he lays a hand on the lighthouse keeper’s chest, there is a light under his skin, too. It follows the fisherman’s hand up into his neck, into his chin—the light shines through the keeper’s eyes.’

There is just that same light in Hannibal’s eyes now: golden, too bright, too obvious.

And Will understands at once what Hannibal means: he understands the way that the world is threaded through the story and the story through the world. The story is in them, and it is here: in the breadth of spring, the height of the sky, and in the sun in Hannibal’s eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Next week, a little interlude from Abigail's perspective.
Thank you so much for reading!

The Anchor

Chapter Summary

Abigail in Florence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Anchor.

Gold winds itself into the mosaics, into the arches taller than the neck can bear, into the domed ceiling. It is deceptive: whites and auburns dominate the basilica yet still it breathes gold only. Abigail is sure that when she tries to remember it tomorrow, she will become convinced there were no colours save gold to speak of.

The tombs are a faded white that denies brilliance. The figures guarding each appear tired more than sad, their heads cradled in the crook of their stone arms, worn out with centuries of contemplation. Here lies Michelangelo. Here lies Machiavelli. Here lies Galileo. *Here stands the empty tomb of Dante Alighieri,* Abigail deciphers from the baroquely ornate Italian. People come here to be struck down with the weight of the dead and the history of magnificence; in a paperback translation she picked up at an antique bookstore, a 19th century visitor reminisces of how life was drained from him under just this weight, how he walked on these stone floors with the fear of falling.

These are the signs you must watch out for, her landlady said: rapid heartbeat, confusion, hallucinations, even a bout of fainting. A man once had a heart-attack because the beauty of gold and time proved too much for him, she warned her; but Abigail doesn't think it's the art or the long-rotten corpses of ancient men that are making her face tingle with needles and her heart flutter in her chest like a bird imprisoned. If her knees are weak, it is because standing here, she imagines the visitor standing in the exact same place two-hundred years prior; because she thinks of all those who had come before and who have come since, who looked like Abigail is looking now, and who felt the life drain from them, and who knew no photograph, no sketch or poem or later tale could contain the sudden presentiment of falling.

Abigail expected she would feel lonely here. She is lonely, yes, but she doesn't feel it: it is entirely impossible to feel lonely when you have been let in on a secret, shared among thousands dead and alive, a secret as old as the streets, tombs and heart-attacks of Florence.

When she exits through the main door, she has to close her eyes against the onslaught of light. Sunset is spilling pink on the street outside Basilica di Santa Croce. Abigail turns right from here, then navigates the maze of narrow streets, trusting her homing instinct to lead her eventually to the river. The houses on either side rise tall like defence walls. To walk between

them is to be choked. Where there is an intersection and the world opens up, people gather to fill in the extra space, drinking, smoking and seamlessly blending languages. It is only June, but already the heat of the day stretches forever, and bare arms and legs gleam with sweat. The air smells of wine, sweet liquer and cured ham.

On the bridge she keeps to the right, pausing a moment to view the distant Ponte Vecchio with its orange house fronts. Paolo, who interviewed her earlier today at the Irish pub, told her that Ponte Vecchio was a tourist trap and that it was overhyped, then pointed to where the postcard stand boasted the pictures they had of it for sale. Paolo acts very much like a local, with all the easy superiority that results, though he comes from Brazil. Abigail was ready to invent a couple Irish ancestors to help her chances, but it seems the pub is Irish only in name.

Through the rose gardens that surround it, Abigail climbs up to Piazzale Michelangelo and its throngs of tourists. In the dying light of day, you can just about make out the moon, full and fed. With a jolt of surprise, Abigail remembers the last time she looked up at the sky and saw a full moon, on her first night here. She's been in Florence a month now. It feels both as though that month had been a year, and as though no more than a day had elapsed.

A couple approaches her, dressed in hiking gear and holding tightly onto their cameras. They're looking for the statue of David, does she know? Abigail points out the white figure rising in the middle of the wide piazza. 'That's the one,' she says. Embarrassed, the couple thank her. They sound German. Abigail, she hopes, sounds halfway *Fiorentina.*

Where the railing protects overeager tourists from tumbling down as they take in the panoramic view, the Duomo glowing crimson in the evening light, Abigail stops and takes out her phone. She promised herself she would call when she got here. She is here. She imagines how easy it would be to have the phone slip out of her hand and disappear down the slope.

The signal sounds twice before a voice distorted by distance asks, 'Abigail?'

'Hi, Doctor Bloom.'

'Abigail,' Doctor Bloom repeats, this time on an exhale. 'How are you? Are you alright?'

'I'm fine.'

'Where are you?'

'Florence,' Abigail says truthfully. 'I needed a change of scenery.'

'You needed a—' she breaks, clearly grasping for her usual calm. 'Okay. I can understand that. But that is something you could have spoken with someone about instead of running away.'

Offense rises in Abigail. 'I didn't run away,' she argues. 'I'm not a child. I've moved.'

'In the dead of night, without telling anyone where you were going,' Alana says matter-of-factly. 'You left your things behind.'

‘I needed a change of wardrobe, too. Anyway, you can’t run away from home if you have no home to run away from, so—’

She is not being quite truthful there. She has the sense that Doctor Bloom knows it, too.

‘I—I am happy you called, Abigail. Of course I am. How is Florence?’

A laying down of weapons. A return to neutral civility. Fine. ‘It’s good,’ Abigail says.

‘Well, I’m glad it’s *good,*’ Doctor Bloom laughs. ‘Can you tell me anything else? How do you spend your days?’

‘I’m taking Italian classes.’ Abigail scratches at the warmed stone with a nail, the rough of the grain drawing a horrid little sound into the air. ‘I go sightseeing. I might get a job at an Irish pub.’

‘That does sound good,’ says Doctor Bloom, the smile obvious in her voice. ‘And how—’

‘How is Hannibal?’ Abigail asks before she can change her mind again.

For a beat, there is silence. Cicadas chirp in a nearby tree.

‘He is well,’ Doctor Bloom says in the end, simply. ‘But I think he would appreciate it if you called to ask him that yourself.’

Abigail scratches at the stone railing some more.

‘I know you wanted a fresh start,’ Doctor Bloom says gently, ‘but that does not mean that you have to burn every bridge you’ve crossed on the way.’

‘I’m not burning anything.’

She hears Doctor Bloom’s preparatory intake of air. ‘Did you steal Hannibal’s car?’

Abigail hesitates. ‘No?’

‘According to Will, he lent you the Bentley and you told him you’d leave it at the airport.’ Her voice has turned severe now. It makes Abigail’s stomach twist, just a little. ‘But when we drove over to pick it up, it wasn’t there.’

‘Well, I don’t know. Could be someone stole it. I’ve heard that happens.’

‘Yes,’ Doctor Bloom says bitterly. ‘That is what Will said as well.’

‘There you go. He’s the crime scene expert, isn’t he?’

‘Abigail. You know this isn’t okay. And I know—I know that this was a difficult experience for you. You’ve lost both parents to violence and then someone who was meant to be a support for you became at risk of sharing that fate. But you are punishing Hannibal for something that is not his fault.’

Abigail snorts. The way it sounds is so awful, like that nail on stone. ‘It’s too late anyway,’ she says, blinking back tears. ‘I sold it.’

‘You *sold* it?’

‘I needed money.’

Doctor Bloom sighs. ‘You are lucky he didn’t report it missing. I’m worried about you, Abigail.’

‘You shouldn’t be,’ Abigail tells her. ‘I’m good.’

And even now, though she’s tugging anxiously on the silken neckerchief shielding her past from view, though her heart feels more at risk than it did when she stood before the world’s golden wonders—though she is alone, sweetly and horribly, and wants to have dialled Hannibal’s number instead—even now, when she says she is good it really is only halfway a lie.

She goes down the slope the other side, heading back toward the river. The call has made her head feel all cotton-stuffed and slow. Was she right to have told Doctor Bloom as much as she has? Probably it was fine. It is not as though Hannibal, Will or the FBI could not find her if they tried: she is still using her bank account, she only got the SIM card in her phone swapped a week ago, she is not doing much to hide at all. But no one seems to be looking.

The neighbourhood where she rents a room lies by the riverfront, the houses all whites and yellows. She turns into a gate by the tourist shop, boasting cheap souvenirs imported from Asia and the smell of glue. She holds the heavy key already proffered for the lock. The large door never wants it at first, resisting the most decisive pulls and pushes, and must be spoken to just right—pulled a little, let free a little, a whisper of a turn and then—it opens at last into a grey stairway that smells like dust motes and the sun. Abigail looks into her post box, like she does every day, expecting each time something awful. A letter requesting her presence in court, stamped up blue. A postcard with a view of the Capitol. A skilful sketch of some scene of manufactured domesticity, of Abigail and a dog and a fireplace feeding the shadows. A note, scrawled in an unsteady hand, telling her when the funeral is.

In the post box, there is only a leaflet for a pizza place. She drops it into the bin and jogs up the narrow staircase all the way to the top.

The room is dark when she enters, window open but the shutters pulled tight to stop the insults of sun. She pushes them open now, leaning over the tin windowsill into the noises of the street. A breeze flitters in, smelling like the murky waters of the river.

She has a small kitchenette at her disposal, two electric burners and a cramped counter space atop the mini fridge. She makes a simple dish of fresh gnocchi she picked up after class with goat cheese and pesto. As she plucks the fullest leaves off her basil, she listens to the drum of conversations that float up the walls and into the open vent above the stove. Her Italian isn’t good enough to decipher them—she doesn’t think it ever will be. The neighbours are like a TV playing in another room, comforting in obscurity. She can almost imagine someone she knows is just out of sight, watching the evening news.

By the time she has eaten and washed, night has come on fully. The lights of the street below are enough to see by, so she leaves her room largely dark as she sits, waiting for her head to clear after the steam of the shower. Once it does, some of the cotton and confused longing budges, too, and Abigail feels suddenly a burst of energy: she doesn't want to go to bed. The night breathes and speaks, the orange lights over the river glimmer. Her shirt sticks to her back, her hair sticks to her neck. If she had to explain it to someone, she would say she feels unmoored: in the world, in her life, in herself. Her own name, if someone said it to her now, would sound odd and wrong in her ears.

But there is no one to say her name and no one she could tell how she's feeling. She is alone. If she wants to go, she should go. She dresses again, she pins her hair high to stop it dripping, and gets her bag and the heavy key, and goes down the stairs again in a trance.

She knows these streets now. They seem alien in the night. The storefronts are switching off their lights one-by-one, pulling down shutters. The pharmacy blares white still, and the bar where people are drinking and laughing, and the ice-cream shop on the corner. Abigail realizes she has forgotten her neckerchief. It doesn't seem to matter very much if her throat is in full view: she is alone, unseen, through the virtue of solitude separated from the world. In another dimension, maybe, looking in.

She feels unmoored, she would say to the someone else if they were here, and it is fine: you are expected to feel unmoored in a foreign country where no one knows you. She feels as though she is walking through someone else's life, the life maybe of that 19th century visitor to Basilica di Santa Croce, or someone else who came after—her steps aren't hers only, her fears and her desires have been felt and hidden by others before her, and even the way the ice-cream she buys herself in a sudden craving crunches with ice and pistachio crumbs on her tongue does not belong to her alone.

At the tourist shop, the owner watches her closely, probably wary she is going to drip her ice-cream on product and make extra work for him. She doesn't want that, so she doesn't peruse: she decides quickly on a postcard with a view of an afternoon panorama and places it on the counter, a request for stamps formed already in her mind.

'Can I post it from here?'

He points her toward a red box set by the door. Without a word, he lends her a pen, too, a black ball-point that distends the back of the card with the force of her resolve. She feels almost drunk, she wonders, writing Will's name on the line. Can you get drunk from the smell of alcohol alone? It suffuses the air here—the bar is just next door.

The ice-cream's good, she writes, *like you said. Going to get more now. Take care.*

Her next scoop of ice-cream she takes with her to the riverfront. She gets these insomniac nights sometimes, and why not spend them where she can sit and admire a view painted for her in the sky? Under the light of the second full moon of this life—someone else's life first and soon, she thinks, hers, too—Abigail sits on a bench in the shade of a pine tree and waits for dawn to come, and eats her ice-cream slowly, to last her the waiting.

Chapter End Notes

We've only got the epilogue left to go! I'll be posting that at some point tomorrow so as not to drag out the ending too much ;)

Meanwhile, thank you all so much for reading.

Epilogue: The Summer

Chapter Summary

Hannibal gets his summer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue: The Summer.

Water shimmers golden and red in the sun, the rays reaching past the paper-thin canopies of woods tired of heat. The sky is a blue dome on a world bordered off by trees. The lake laps at his sides, disturbed by the breeze. Dusk is hours away yet, but the day has begun fraying, growing threadbare, letting in the night.

Hannibal drifts on his back, arms splayed to the sides just enough to stay afloat. Despite the summer heat, exertion and water have made him cold, and the sensation of the lake's tongue on his stomach is no longer a relief.

His ears are wholly submerged and his eyes closed against the sun, so it is not as though any one of his senses could have reliably told him to look—and still he does, angling his head sideways and awakening from half-lucidity just in time to see Will beckoning him back to shore.

The distance that Hannibal's swimming has put between them is an obstacle to Hannibal's limbs, already aching from exercise, but not so to Will's voice, which carries easily across the silent water.

'If you start drowning,' he warns, 'I'm not coming in to save you.'

Hannibal feels a spark of annoyance in him. He bats it away. Though skewed by concern, Will's judgement on how much is too much tends to be sound, and Hannibal can feel his body agreeing with it. He would prefer for his body to agree less with Will and more with Hannibal himself. He would prefer to be able to swim for as long as he likes, and once he gets to the shallows to wade across them without hobbling—but that is not to be.

When she sees him approach, Zoe leaps into the water, spraying and panting, and makes to intercept him. Hannibal picks her up, cradling her to his chest to share some body heat: he is nearly out himself, but she looks miserably like a plucked chicken when wet.

'You would let me drown?' he asks Will when he feels under his feet the first grains of sandy beach, a narrow stretch of white that quickly turns into the clumpy forest dark.

‘Water’s cold,’ says Will. ‘Zoe would try to save you, though.’

‘At least there’s that.’

Zoe wriggles out of Hannibal’s hold to shake herself off properly. A few drops catch in Will’s hair; one hangs on an eyelash. When Will blinks, it falls to his cheek like a tear.

‘Hannibal. Sit.’

Distraction is not allowed when there is towelling off to be done. Hannibal receives the treatment before Zoe does, which convinces him he must be looking colder than he supposed.

Will’s arm, exposed and browning, is warm where Hannibal sidles closer to steal some heat. He wraps the towel firmer around himself, stretching out his legs to invite the sun to kiss it better.

‘Or you could stop pushing it,’ Will suggests drily, ‘and not get hypothermia.’

‘The reason I am getting hypothermia is precisely that I’ve kept idle for three months.’

‘Oh, yeah. I’m sure you’d feel much better if you’d taken your gunshot wound on daily jogs.’

Will shifts where he sits, moving the fishing rod into the other hand. He dusted it off the month before last, and since then there has been fresh fish on their table and there have been new pleasures in store for Hannibal, who is asked to attach lines and tie knots, and to perform all manner of duties that require the precision that Will’s hands lack. This necessity for aid is what he imagines had kept Will from reclaiming the leisure for so long. Something fearful still ignites in his eyes if he ever catches Hannibal smile when Will asks for help.

Naturally, crafting his own lures is out of the question. To remedy this, Hannibal has gifted him a set he’d made himself, each lure designed around the simple theme of knuckle bone and red thread. For his first attempt at the art, Hannibal thinks they came out rather well.

‘Well. When the FBI come knocking,’ Will said when he saw them, ‘I know what I need to flush down the toilet first.’

‘If you don’t like them, you are free to discard them.’

‘I didn’t say I didn’t like them—’

‘No. You immediately conjured a scenario in which you flush them down the toilet.’

Will has since got one of the lures framed. He refuses to display it anywhere but the bedroom, even though Hannibal insists no one would be able to tell Randall Tier’s knuckle bones just by looking at them.

‘What are you going to catch me?’ Hannibal asks him now, gazing without purpose at the place where the line dips into water.

‘I don’t know.’ A smile rings clear in his voice. ‘What do you want?’

‘A shark,’ Hannibal says immediately.

Will snorts. ‘A shark. Alright. Might take a while. How about salmon for now? I think I can do salmon.’

‘I suppose.’

Feeling a little warmer, Hannibal rests his head on Will’s shoulder and lets his mind drift on tiredness, much as his body earlier drifted on the deep blue of the lake. His musings are especially pleasant, tinged with victory: he’s had two painful breakthroughs today, one in physical therapy and one during his session with Franklyn.

Hannibal’s muscle thrummed with the ghost of that first breakthrough as he sat listening to Franklyn’s halted breaths. The pain he felt in his leg was a mirror to the pain Franklyn carried in his chest—an emptiness where a piece of flesh had been torn out without consent.

It was only their second session together since Tobias. The first had largely been spent on discussing referral. Hannibal really should not have been surprised that the offer was met with obstinacy only.

‘You agreed to see me,’ Franklyn said through tears. ‘I told you that I would understand if you couldn’t—if it was too painful—but now you’ve agreed, and you see, we can help each other get through it—’

‘I am open to seeing you, Franklyn. But I don’t want you to cling to this arrangement purely because it is familiar. My partner’s phone call was the catalyst for a traumatic experience for you: it would be natural if you felt more comfortable discussing it with another therapist.’

‘Well, I won’t!’

After that first session, Hannibal felt torn. On the one hand, it seemed more prudent to keep Franklyn close; on the other, he kept to a limited patient roster since his injury and wasn’t sure if he wanted Franklyn’s tearful loss of innocence occupying a spot. He also had the feeling Will might not appreciate it if Hannibal kept Franklyn on, which is why he neglected to mention it.

But today—oh, how sensible after all to have allowed Franklyn back. They spoke of blindness and betrayal, and Franklyn’s tears glistened on his cheeks like diamonds, the helplessness and impotence of them a mirror in which Hannibal could examine himself—does Hannibal, too, feel helpless in the wake of blindness and betrayal?

‘What if I never stop feeling this way?’ Franklyn choked out. ‘What if this is it? If this is what it’s going to be like for the rest of my life? And yes, I know, feelings pass, but I—’

‘What if they don’t?’ Hannibal interrupted smoothly. ‘Perhaps you will feel helpless until your dying day. Then what?’

Franklyn stared at him with eyes widened with fear. ‘I can’t,’ he begged. ‘I can’t live like this.’

‘You can. It is perfectly feasible. But even if this feeling is to remain your constant companion, you must learn to walk again, Franklyn.’ Franklyn’s eyes snapped to Hannibal’s leg before he caught himself and reddened. Hannibal ignored it. ‘You have room in you for many feelings besides, though it might not feel that way when you let your helplessness overwhelm you. Someday, you can use that space for joy and hope—but though these might seem distant prospects now, I do think even now other emotions occupy the space instead.’

Franklyn was silent, his mouth set in a tight line. He was trying not to cry again.

‘Do you feel heartbroken?’ Hannibal suggested. ‘Lonely? Afraid?’

Franklyn closed his eyes, then shook his head. When he opened them again and spoke, the glint in them was still only tears, but appeared more like steel.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I feel *angry*.’

‘That,’ Hannibal said, smiling, ‘is very interesting.’

The memory creases Hannibal’s mouth in an echo of that smile. A dog—Lana, he confirms as he glances down—licks at his foot.

‘What are you thinking?’ Will’s voice cuts through the reminiscence.

‘I had a productive session today.’

‘Yeah? Who with?’

Neglecting to mention Franklyn is one thing, but an outright lie is too risky a gamble. The ground on which they sit only feels steady—there are cracks.

‘Franklyn,’ he admits.

‘I didn’t know you were seeing Franklyn again.’

‘I must have forgotten to mention it.’

‘Sure.’ Will sounds amused when he says it, but that is not all he sounds. Hannibal can’t put his finger on it. It makes him feel cold again where he’s been warmed by the sun.

They do not stay long afterward. A disjointed, sour air has crept into their silence, and the skies have consequently lost much of their blue. Will does not turn away from him, and he helps him up with an extended hand just the same, but his palm on Hannibal’s hip feels clammy.

Any other day, Hannibal could easily admit he resents having to rely on another for getting off the ground, and that he wishes he could run again. In moments such as this, though, he finds he likes it that they are each hobbled by a different handicap, that they have carved into each other’s bodies defects that render them dependable. If the civilised world should ever refuse to have them and they abscond into the realm of ice and pine, neither will be able to survive without the other.

The house is silent when they enter. Saturday is the construction workers' day off. An emptiness caves where their kitchen used to be, fixtures ripped from their place and dead wires hanging idle. The wall between kitchen and study has been felled, the desk and chairs moved into the second bedroom upstairs. In their place stands their new fridge, odd in a space that retains the aesthetic of a reading room. Will makes a beeline for it, bucket of fish drooping his right shoulder. Hannibal asks him to cut some thyme from the garden to go with dinner, and Will gives a nod but says nothing else.

Hannibal's work surface these days is a single wooden table. His stove is an electric double burner plugged into the socket by the fridge. They were supposed to retreat to the Baltimore house for the duration of the renovations, but they only made it a single week. Will said nothing about it, just as he said nothing when the drill first punctured his house and when the wall was brought down; but Hannibal could see he missed the proximity of water, of the woods, of his garden, and missed the stabilising influence of a place well-trusted. Now, they retire to Baltimore only for the worst of the noise and dust.

Well. The fish is fresh and so are the vegetables: even an electric burner cannot spoil them completely.

Will sets the thyme on the table by Hannibal's elbow. Then, he goes. Hannibal's lungs fail to take in half the air required, and still he lets him go. Will can't be pushed. Like an unstable solution, a Will whole must be treated with caution if one does not wish to be burnt. Hannibal is learning every day the pressure points that have emerged at the junctures of joining. If he pushes now, Will is going to be cruel. If Will is cruel, he is going to sag later into self-recrimination. The first might be a thing to behold; the second will ensure the whole night is spoiled.

They made love this morning. How impossible it strikes him now. It did happen: he remembers perfectly the way Will looked, half-asleep and satisfied in the nestle of sheets stained sweaty, when Hannibal said his goodbyes before setting out for Baltimore. The post-it note Hannibal left him on the fridge, pinned between Will's scrawled recipe for red beans and the postcard with a Florentine panorama, serves as proof. *Sheets in the hamper, please,* he wrote, knowing Will would never remember the instructions whispered into his ear in between lazy kisses. They made love just this morning, yet to touch Will now would be a crime. How fascinating.

They take dinner on the porch. Will sets out three candles to dispel shadows, one on the table and two on the porch railing, which Hannibal interprets as apology for his silence. Mosquitoes buzz around them, annoying the dogs. Moths bat themselves against the windows into the bright house. The air smells of a rainfall that hasn't happened.

Will's finger traces the round edge of his wine glass. 'I'm worried,' he says darkly. Such a simple statement, yet his demeanour infuses it with such depths of meaning: he is worried about Hannibal and for Hannibal, fearful for himself and of himself, jealous and angry and distrustful.

'You have no need to be.'

Will laughs. 'You're a bad liar.'

‘Perhaps. I am not lying.’

‘Your standard of what is cause for concern is not a great gauge.’ Will fixes him with a look. ‘But it’s not like I can give you shit for taking risks, can I? Bit hypocritical when I’m the one fertilizing our summer squash with corpse.’

Hannibal smiles. Will has a particular talent for romantic gestures, but the burying of a body in the garden they made together remains Hannibal’s favourite. ‘The risk you took has brought food to our table. When our ancestors hunted, they gambled with their lives every time they ventured after their prey. We must consider the reward when we judge the risk.’

‘Our ancestors took risks to fill their bellies and avoid extinction. Meanwhile, you’re off pursuing idle curiosity.’

‘I would argue curiosity has been as essential to human development as satisfying hunger.’

Will leans back in his seat, sighing annoyance. The tendons on his neck stand out sharp and awful: Hannibal would like nothing more than to close his teeth around one.

‘Are you worried, Will,’ he asks leisurely, sensing under his fingers that this is the right moment for a *little* push, ‘or are you jealous?’

Will’s teeth show when he smiles. His canines are pointed, but deceptively small—no one would ever suspect how much damage they can wreck. They’re doing it now to Hannibal’s body where he sits, without even needing to get close enough to touch.

‘I’m jealous of your curiosity. It’s a hard thing to compete against.’

‘There is no competition.’

Will raises an eyebrow. ‘Isn’t there?’

Hannibal meets his eye to better convey sincerity. It’s an easy enough thing to admit.

‘Not anymore.’

‘Well,’ says Will, shoulders relaxing slightly. ‘I guess as long as you’ve got your priorities straight.’

They wash the dishes in the bathroom sink: Hannibal lathering and rinsing, Will wiping to set them aside on the wicker chair in the corner. It’s awkward work. They have lost two plates to it already. Tonight, there is another close call when Buster stands on his hind legs to lick at a droplet of water left on the wine glass that Will’s just put on the chair. Will catches it seconds before it comes careening down to the tile.

‘We should have kept to the original design rather than expand,’ says Hannibal. ‘We would be nearly done now if not for that wall.’

‘The kitchen is too small for you,’ Will counters. ‘It’s better to get it all done now that we’re at it, so it’s ready for winter.’

A cold tone finds its way into Will's voice whenever he mentions the winter. Hannibal estimates it is one-quarter lingering anger and three-quarters fear. Winter will be the anniversary of Will's descent into illness, which would be the perfect occasion for an ironic relapse; more, it is by its own right a season of frost, infection and of the dark hours that Will rightfully fears might herald another bout of depression. Will wants them to have the house prepared for the eventuality of prolonged isolation: accordingly, Hannibal is canning their produce, he is freezing their fish, he is organizing their medicine shelves and closets. Will wants to never have to leave the house come winter if it can be avoided; Hannibal hopes he can soothe these fears eventually, but he is prepared for the possibility of failure.

'Have you always had such a fear of the cold, Will?'

'I don't know, have I?' Will parrots sourly. 'I guess it might be courtesy of the faerie that stole away with my body—they always dress real scarce.'

Hannibal isn't sure what enjoyment Will draws from mocking him in this way. He must draw some: it is not as though he can possibly expect that Hannibal will be persuaded out of his convictions.

'Half of you subconsciously revels in the cold, while the Other subconsciously fears it,' Hannibal answers seriously, ignoring Will's eyeroll. 'For him, it is a reminder of a place he has so long wanted to escape.'

'You know, if anyone here was ever possessed, I think it was you. You're the one banging on about your Faerie King. It borders on obsession.' Will takes the next plate from him with a sharp tug. It sends a shiver up Hannibal's arm. 'Makes sense, too. Don't eat anything they give you to eat is the lore, isn't it, and you told me yourself you'd eaten that bear's heart he gave you.'

'That was your story, Will,' Hannibal corrects gently.

'What?'

'It's not that I disagree with your interpretation. But in the interest of fairness, *you* told me the story. A little boy wished for a bear as a pet and went to the snow kingdom to demand it. The hunter gave him a bear's heart to eat to show him what greed gets you. I remember.'

Will's eyebrows crease. 'No? *You* told me that story based on when you were little, when you ate a bunch of holly and got high as shit. The hunter's a shorthand, obviously—I know you say hunter sometimes when you mean the Other—'

Wonder rises in Hannibal like a river flooding. He will never get used to it.

'Will. You told me that story after you were released from the hospital, on our first night back in Wolf Trap.'

Will meets his eye. The fork he is holding is dripping water on his bare feet.

He hesitates. 'I don't remember that.'

‘That doesn’t surprise me. But I distinctly remember hearing the story from your mouth and wondering at how closely it fit my memory of the event.’

‘Well, maybe you’d told me about when you hallucinated a bear on holly of all things—it must have given me the idea—’

‘I never told you about the holly.’

‘You probably forgot,’ Will argues again.

Hannibal laughs. ‘No matter how hard you deny that the world is threaded through you, filling every crack and every hollow, Will—the truth will not allow itself to be forgotten.’

Will turns away. He is hiding the contortion of his face at the words. There is a glow of pink on the back of his neck. Hannibal wonders whether all gods shy away from being told of their divinity, or if this shyness is unique to Hannibal’s.

At night, the house remains luminous, the lamps left to blaze warmth until the very moment Will is ready to close his eyes. Hannibal sits by the harpsichord that has assumed the bed’s place in the lounge. From upstairs, sounds of Will’s evening ablutions trickle down and feed Hannibal’s concentration. His fingers sit heavy on the fat keys, the first hums of melody reverberating in his wrists before he ever relays them to the strings.

A composition must always begin with its focal point, with the stir of heart toward which every note is building. For this piece, that will be the bear’s heart and the holly, the imagined and the real dreamt by the world into Will or by Will into the world. Then, perhaps the peace of the morning’s sliding together of bodies, untainted yet by the weight of day—or should he start with sweetness rather than end on it, should the final notes be dark with the fearful warning in Will’s eyes that might never fully dissipate?

‘Bathroom’s free,’ Will announces from behind him. As he approaches, the clean smell of soap comes off him in perfect breath-like wafts.

He straddles the bench at Hannibal’s side, pale thighs and greyish-brown knees splayed and pressed in close. He plants his chin on Hannibal’s shoulder to listen to the first flutters of melody. One hand, he lets fall to pet Betty; the other, he wraps around Hannibal’s stomach.

‘Do you ever wonder if we could have done it differently?’ he asks in a small voice, pained and weary with reflection. ‘If we could have skipped past the hurt?’

Hannibal tilts his head in consideration. ‘If we’d skipped past the hurt,’ he says, ‘you would not be here.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘I do. You are whole again, but that whole is not equal to the whole of the old Will Graham. The old Will Graham would not have allowed me to see him the way I see you.’

‘Maybe not back then. But not all change has to come from pain.’

Hannibal’s fingers tremble, just the once. He forces them steady a millisecond too late.

‘It’s hard for you to consider that.’ Will sounds surprised. ‘You’re afraid of what would happen if you stopped believing it had all been necessary.’

Hannibal says nothing to indicate agreement or rebuttal. He covers the hand that sits on his side with his own.

‘Alright,’ Will says softly. ‘We wouldn’t be here otherwise. I can live with that.’

Hannibal’s next exhale is just a little too strong. Will doesn’t comment on it.

‘What are you composing anyway?’ he asks lightly, sensing that Hannibal would like a change of subject.

‘Something for you.’

Will hums into his neck. ‘Didn’t you finish that last week?’

‘I did. But we are in a new week. Melodies must be adapted to reflect the change.’

A gentle laugh, just below Hannibal’s ear. ‘So what, you’re going to tinker at the same piece for the rest of your life? You know consistency isn’t my strong suit.’

‘No, Will. A single piece won’t do.’ Hannibal catches his eye and smiles. ‘This is something new.’

The End.

Chapter End Notes

And this is it!
An enormous thank you to everyone who's stuck with this fic. I have never before worked on a single project for this long and have never written anything near as wordy and complex, so I imagine this story will always remain close to my heart. I was very glad to share it with you all; if you've made it all the way to the end, it would make me incredibly happy if you left a comment to say so! And if you want to swing by my tumblr for a question or chat, my asks are always open :)

End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Come say hi on tumblr at gzdacz-writes-fic.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!